

Going Professional - Taking the Next Step

Text and photography copyright © Christopher Jordan. All rights reserved.

Many readers of the NPN site are very serious about their photography and have aspirations of eventually pursuing their passion full-time (myself included). Over the last two to three years I've had the opportunity to be involved in two different book projects that were very different in terms of approach, timing, etc. In this article I would like to discuss the history of the two projects, compare and contrast them in terms of shooting process, and offer my perspective on the differences and what they mean for me in terms of my ongoing journey to becoming a full-time photographer. **DISCLAIMER:** This is only my experience and thoughts, and may or may not bear any resemblance to the life of a full-time photographer. The thoughts are offered for your reflection and perhaps discussion in the forums elsewhere on this site. I hope some of the full-time pros who participate here will share their wisdom as well.

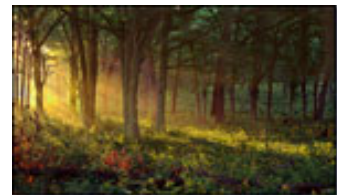
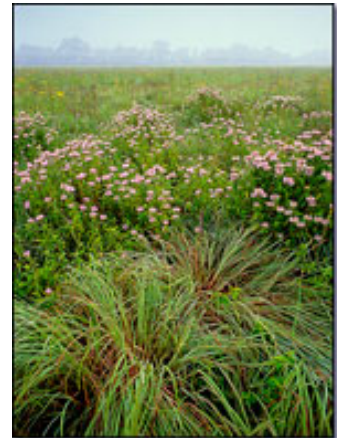
HISTORY

In August of 2004, I was pleased and fortunate to see the release of the book *Unexpected Indiana: A Portfolio of Natural Landscapes* (published by Quarry Books, an imprint of Indiana University Press). This book was a collaborative effort between me and Ron Leonetti - a very talented landscape photographer I met in 2003 through an exhibit in which we were both participating. The book is a collection of images captured over the course of 4-5 years photographing throughout the state of Indiana.

Of note in the process of capturing the images for *Unexpected Indiana* was the fact that there were no constraints, deadlines or requirements on either Ron or me when we were out shooting. Our primary goal during the process was to capture the most interesting and (hopefully) artistic images we could in the locations that we chose to visit. If the photographs taken did not meet our own exacting standards, they were disposed of or relegated to secondary status. It was not until we had a commitment from IU Press that we went through the process of reviewing our various images and selecting the ones that ultimately appeared in print. We estimate that we reviewed a total of 500-600 images between the two of us before settling on the final 138 images that appear in the book. Please understand those numbers don't include the hundreds of images that never made the "keepers" pile in the first place.

The exhibit that I mentioned earlier was co-sponsored by both the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the Indiana Nature Conservancy (among other co-sponsors and benefactors/financiers). The Nature Conservancy was kind enough to provide a variety of support to *Unexpected*, including location maps, some assistance with species identification and, most prominently, the Introduction which was written by the director of the state chapter, Mary McConnell. During the conversations and interactions that went into completing *Unexpected Indiana*, we also discussed the possibility of an illustrated *Field Guide* of nature preserves that The Nature Conservancy had been involved with or currently manages. The concept was to publicize the Conservancy's work in Indiana, to provide location and conservation information for each preserve, and to illustrate the preserves using high quality photography that would hopefully show each one in a favorable light. The ultimate end-product was envisioned to be a combination of a field guide that would be useful to put in your car and direct you to a preserve of interest, as well as provide coffee-table-book quality images of each location. We again received favorable interest from IU Press, and began work on the book in late 2004. The deadline for submission of images to be included in the *Field Guide* was November 1, 2005, and the book was released in October of 2006.

A total of approximately 70 different preserves are mentioned in the Guide, spread across 54 different chapters. Each chapter needed at least two photographs and, depending on the size of the write up submitted, as many as ten photographs per chapter. The total number of images used in the book was approximately 270, with all but perhaps a dozen of those supplied by Ron and me. Note that we almost doubled the number of images needed relative to *Unexpected Indiana*, with



only 12 months shooting time compared to 4-5 years. In addition, one attribute of *Unexpected Indiana* that was very obvious to us was that our best images from any particular location were usually captured following multiple visits to that location. Given the time frame of the *Field Guide* project and the number of locations to be visited, making multiple visits was almost impossible. There was very much a sense during the project that any visit to a preserve location MUST result in some usable images. We were able to use photographs from some locations that had been captured in the past, and we also supplemented some of the location images with species shots (flowers, birds, etc.) that might have been photographed at other times or locations. However, at least two thirds of the images in the book were new photographs taken during very late 2004 or 2005.

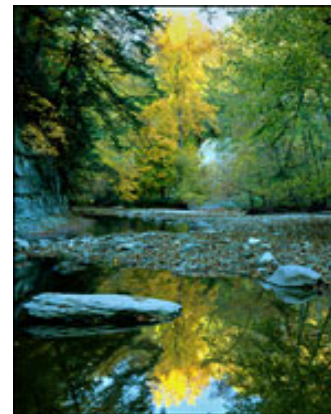
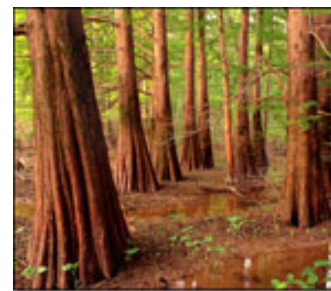
LESSONS LEARNED

I believe that the differences in the experience of shooting these two books has been very instructive in terms of distinguishing some of the characteristics of serious amateur/semi-professional shooting versus a true, for hire, professional experience. My take on those differences is outlined below.

Getting the Shot: This is one of the two most obvious differences in the shooting process for *Unexpected Indiana* versus the *Field Guide*. For *Unexpected Indiana*, there were no time pressures or requirements to get some type of image from a particular location. There were many locations in Indiana that we visited when shooting prior to the completion of *Unexpected Indiana* that did not make the final cut, due to the merits of the image. I never felt pressed for time or the absolute need to get a photo from a particular location, and almost always felt that I could come back some other time, or go to another location that I might prefer. For the *Field Guide*, none of those luxuries applied. We were required to get at least a shot or two from at least one location in each chapter. Overall we probably included shots from 60-65 preserves. When you can only shoot weekends, the need to get a shot from a location that you will only visit once is a unique sort of pressure I have not experienced before. Compound that with the fact that you may have driven 2 to 2 1/2 hours to arrive at sunrise in the middle of summer (yes, that means getting up at 3am or earlier), to photograph a flower bloom that may only last 4-5 days, and your requirements become quite demanding. I had that exact situation at a preserve in southern Indiana called Teeple Glade. This preserve is an example of a limestone glade and is very uncommon in Indiana. This particular glade is known for its outstanding bloom of purple coneflowers in early-mid June. I was told by the preserve steward ahead of time that the bloom was at peak, so I arose at 2:30 am on a Saturday morning and drove 2 1/2 hours to be there at sunrise (around 5:20 am at that time of year). This was truly a one-shot deal - the deadline for the shooting prevented any chance of an additional "maybe next year" visit. I was extremely fortunate that the bloom was in fact at peak (and absolutely stunning). More important, the light and wind that day were quite favorable - I was able to make 1-4 second exposures of these lovely flowers without any significant wind to deal with. I burned lots of film to make sure I had the images I needed, and was pleased to see the results afterwards, but the need to "get the shot" while I was there was definitely on my mind in a way that never occurred during *Unexpected Indiana* shooting.

Editing: The second area of major difference relates to the editing of images. The need to provide images from certain preserves forced us to loosen our usual stringent requirements around what constitutes an "acceptable" image. Many of the photographs we captured and included were as much documentary as artistic (though certainly we were always striving to achieve both goals). In truth, some of the preserves are not the most photogenic sites around, but the locations are important for preservation of habitat for plants and/or animals, or they may be sites where restoration is a future goal. So we weren't always dealing with the ideal locations for outstanding photographic results. Also, sometimes the conditions did not lend themselves to the ideal representation of a location. Again referring to the Teeple Glade location, there were a couple of shots that I took that really would have worked a bit better with soft blue sky and a few clouds. As I was shooting though, the sky was slowly clouding up and by the time I found those particular compositions the sky was pretty bland. I shot them anyway, and they are useful to illustrate some of the topography of the preserve, but my mind's eye wishes for a slightly different look to a couple of them that I simply didn't have a chance to explore. This is a necessary compromise that makes sense in the *Field Guide*, but that likely would not have been acceptable in *Unexpected Indiana*.

Do Your Job vs. Follow Your Passion: Another area of difference was the constant nagging feeling that I needed to be out shooting more. I feel that way to some degree all the time simply because I love nature and being outdoors and taking photographs. However, this was a different sort of "You have signed a contract and have a photographic job to do and you have a deadline and there are probably some cool photos out there right now that you are missing so hurry up and get going" pressure that was very



different than any self-imposed desire to get out. In addition, I spent a lot of time the last year planning my photographic travel based on where I had to shoot, not where I felt like shooting. Over the course of 12 months, that difference in approach became a little wearing, and I was glad when the images were finally submitted and I could once again feel free to wander and explore wherever I chose. Certainly I was passionate about the *Field Guide*, but it was difficult to feel comfortable taking a break.

Access: On the other hand, Ron and I got access to locations and preserves that the general public does not. A few preserves will be highlighted in the *Field Guide* that are not open to the general public. Being allowed access to those locations was a wonderful privilege and provided some photo opportunities that were unique in the state. Related to that, we also found out about a surprising number of preserves and locations that we were not aware of (all our travel for Unexpected Indiana notwithstanding) that we will certainly visit again. Perhaps an Unexpected Indiana 2 will be forthcoming...?

Practice, Practice, Practice: The up side of the constant need to get out and shoot was that I felt like I was in good practice, and my eye was "sharp" whenever I was able to visit a particular preserve. Some people seem to be ready to go at a moment's notice when photographing, but my photography is best when I have been shooting a lot and am in good practice. The compressed time frame of the project forced me to be out as often as possible, which led to a higher comfort level with "seeing" what was before me, instead of just "looking." I believe (and you'll just have to take my word for it) that this ultimately led to a higher overall level of quality in the images I took.

In the final analysis, I feel fortunate to have been a part of this project. I now know of many new places to photograph, I have expanded my image library significantly, and I am optimistic that additional opportunities and contacts will come from the book and my association with it. I also feel that I have a better grasp of the differences between shooting "on assignment" as opposed to "on my own." I have always believed that I am capable of this sort of assignment or project driven photography, and this project has validated that feeling. Now if someone would just pay me outrageous sums to do this ALL the time!

CJ-NPN 1207

Comments on NPN landscape photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

Christopher Jordan resides in Zionsville, Indiana and specializes in medium and large format natural landscape photography in the Great Lakes and Midwestern regions of the United States. He is currently working on his third book, in collaboration with Ron Leonetti. To see more of his photographs and writing, you can visit christopherjordanphotography.com.



[Site Map](#) • [NPN Membership](#) • [Front Page](#) • [Reader's Forum](#) • [Links](#) • [Gift Shoppe](#) • [Terms of Use](#)

Copyright 2000 - 2007, Nature Photographers Online Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved.