



The Camera Hunter®

The Professional Nature Photographer

Photography and Text Copyright Bill Silliker, Jr.
All rights reserved.

A recent NPN Forum topic came to mind as I prepared to write this month's column: what is the difference between a professional and an amateur photographer. Here's a sampling of Forum responses -

"I have often heard the difference is the pro knows when NOT to fire the shutter - a deceptively simple statement that has enormous implications."

"The major difference between the two is how they conduct themselves out in the field."

"A pro pays the home loan with money made by photography. An amateur has a "day job" that pays the rent."

"You can have a pro and an amateur of equal skill, or maybe the amateur has higher skills...one chooses to make a living from his or her work, the other (whose photos may be better) does it as a hobby."

"As soon as dollar #1 touches your hand technically you are a professional photographer, though I guess there are different levels. There are casual pros, part-time pros, big-time pros etc."

It Takes More Than Money

Those who felt that a professional is simply one who makes money from his or her photography are technically correct by the dictionary. But while the classic definition revolves around earning a living at a trade or craft, shouldn't a "pro" also meet some standard for producing quality work in an ethical manner to deserve the broader meaning that so many of us attach to the designation?

Don't we have an image that a professional in any field is an "expert"-a person with a better than average capability derived from training and time spent doing something?

Consider this excerpt of my response-

To be true nature photography "pro" - deserving of the supposed status that the designation seems to hold for lots of folks - first requires an attitude that includes a combination of respect for nature and fellow photographers of all levels of ability, plus ethical business practices...

There are a lot of great photographers out there that could be pros... If your attitude meets my standards it doesn't matter to me if you don't sell as much as me, or if have another "part time" job.

Am I wrong about that? Or should it only be about money?

Before you answer, consider the following words about my visit to a Maine seabird nesting island a few weeks ago -



Human thoughtlessness during the 18th and 19th centuries nearly drove most of the seabirds that help to make the Maine Coast a special place out of existence. Several species actually became extinct, including the Great Auk, a flightless relative of the puffin.

Plume hunters especially prized the terns. As a result, they decimated most of Maine's nesting colonies of common and Arctic terns by the early 1900's.

Awareness of both the direct and indirect human impacts on seabirds has in recent years led to creative efforts to help them return to their historic nesting islands. And with each passing year, increasing numbers of seabirds return to the coast of Maine to raise their young.

Perhaps the most special of these birds is the Arctic tern. The Arctic terns leaving Maine's islands in August fly across the Atlantic and then southward down the coast of Africa to the then summer waters of the Antarctic Ocean. That's the longest migration known to man, a round trip of some 22,000 miles. But what's more amazing is that these birds return year after year to not only the same island, but also to the same patch of open ground to nest!



After reading this, can you understand why it is a rare privilege to visit an Arctic tern nesting island to photograph them raising their young?

There's a message here for all who seek to photograph wildlife: none of us has a right to photograph any species. While most animals are readily available for all to photograph, some are at times so sensitive that we must either accompany researchers or have a special reason to access them.

That's not elitist. If all who sought to photograph terns landed on their nesting islands, the cumulative disturbance would disastrously impact their productivity.

This trip was organized by a private citizen to help inform about the need for a Friends of Maine Seabird Islands. Why a new Friends group? As I write this, a critical \$990,000 request from the annual distribution of the Land and Water Conservation Fund – money collected from offshore oil and gas leasing by the federal government, not taxes - has been removed from the Federal Fiscal Year 2003 budget. That means that 6 Maine islands that the USF&WS was to purchase from willing sellers to support similar seabird colonies face an uncertain future until acquisition funding is secured.

Protecting these unique islands is the best hope we have of restoring a once magnificent resource for future generations to enjoy. Look again at the photograph of this world-traveling Arctic tern feeding its chick and tell me it's not important work.

The privilege to accompany the small group to land on Metinic Island recently was offered to this photographer because I have supported the efforts of the Petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge, which manages this special island, with my time, words and pictures - not because I am a so-called professional.

Learn your craft, help with such efforts and you too might get such a lucky invitation someday. And you won't have to be a classic definition "pro" – just be a "real" one.

Catch yours in the good light.

BS-NPN 012

<http://camerahunter.com>

Comments on this column? Send them to the [editor](#).

with the results published in magazines internationally and in 9 of his own books. Bill was an instructor of wildlife and nature photography for L. L. Bean's Outdoor Discovery Program and a member of the Fuji Film Talent Team. Read more about Bill on the [Camera Hunter archives page](#).

[Site Map](#) • [NPN Membership](#) • [Front Page](#) • [Reader's Forum](#) • [Links](#) • [Gift Shoppe](#) • [Online Portfolios](#)

Copyright 2000 - 2003, Nature Photographers Online Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved.