

2012 MS OUTDOORS ISSUE

MISSISSIPPI SPORTS

www.msportsmagazine.com



TM
VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2012
\$4.99

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THE KING OF CAMO

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Cover photo by Joe Mac
Hudspeth, Brandon



ON THE RECORD WITH JEFF HAMMOND


**NEW SOUTHERN MISS ATHLETIC DIRECTOR TELLS US WHY
HE THINKS THE USM STORY IS MUCH MORE COMPELLING
THAN ANY OTHER D-1 PROGRAM IN OUR STATE**



THE CALL OF THE WILD

Brandon's Joe Mac Hudspeth has been capturing memorable images of Mississippi's outdoors for decades

STORY BY JUDY SMITH
PHOTOS BY JOE MAC HUDSPETH

A photograph of a wood duck in flight over water. The duck is shown from the side, with its wings spread wide, revealing the intricate patterns on its feathers. Its head is turned back, showing the characteristic green, red, and white plumage of a wood duck. The water below is dark and slightly rippled. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape.

Stillness surrounded the swamp as the sun began to climb up into the Mississippi sky. The waters started to come alive as wildlife awoke to greet a brand new day, but an eerie presence took over the land, enveloping the area in darkness. Armed with only his camera equipment, Joe Mac Hudspeth, Jr., looked up from his silent position in the waters to discern why the skies had turned dark. A fog bank rolled over the swamp, casting a spooky spell on the waters. Bare trees and snagged limbs reached up to the heavens, adding to the eerie presence with their dark shapes. With his camera and small 70/210 mm lens in hand, just as Hudspeth turned to snap a picture of the ghostly scene, a drake wood duck--Hudspeth's main reason for being in the cold waters before dawn--flew up and perched itself on a lonesome snag. Hudspeth was able to take two pictures before the duck flew away. That lucky instance led an iconic image entitled "Top of the Morning" that now graces the cover of Hudspeth's second tribute to wildlife photography, *Return to the Southern Wild*.

Brandon resident and Ole Miss graduate Hudspeth can recount many such instances of luck, being in the right place and time to cap-

ture beautiful, enchanting images of the Mississippi landscape and the wild things that call this wonderful corner of the world their home. By mere chance, Hudspeth was rambling down an old dirt road when he spotted a buck running in a nearby field. When Hudspeth got his camera up and ready, he was able to snap off one photo, capturing a gorgeous image of the deer, highlighted by the setting sun, jumping over a fence as a truck headed toward Hudspeth. Masterfully, Hudspeth captured the beauty of the deer and the strength of its mighty muscles amid the gorgeous backroads landscape, and the image graced the 2001-2002 Mississippi Sportsman License. Although Hudspeth has been very fortunate to catch such beautiful moments through his lens, he admits that there have many more times when he has experienced “the one that got away” or the image that he wasn’t quick enough to catch or there wasn’t enough light to create a clear image. Despite those few misses, Hudspeth has learned the value of doing his homework on the habits of these wildlife creatures, allowing him to be in the right location to capture the beauty and majesty of Mississippi.

“Joe Mac’s photos are breathtaking!” Melanie Starnes, office manager and events coordinator for the Mississippi Wildlife Federation, said. “The color in each photo is so vivid; it’s almost as if you were there. I’ve yet to see a photo of his I didn’t like.”

The very accomplished Hudspeth has built an impressive resume of breathtaking images of the Mississippi landscape and its wildlife. Hudspeth’s impressive record of publication speaks volumes about his expertise in the field of wildlife photography. Since 1997, Hudspeth’s images have been featured on every Mississippi Sportsman’s License, and his gorgeous images have graced every Mississippi Duck Stamp since 1999. He has been published over a thousand times and has won a few prestigious awards for his work. Looking at his amazing ability to paint stunning images with his camera lens, it’s hard to believe that he never had any formal training in the field of photography--just a great love for nature and a desire to capture its beauty.

Throughout Hudspeth’s life, he has always loved photography. Hudspeth grew up fishing and hunting in the hills of Northern Mississippi. This Oxford native always had a great love of nature, tracking deer, doves, quail, and whatever was in season. Throughout his journeys into the woods, there was one essential that he never left home without--his Kodak 110 Instamatic camera.

“I made it a rule that no one could skin or process their catch of the day without me getting a ‘hero’ shot of their haul,” Hudspeth said. “I always put the pictures up on the hunting lodge wall and in my scrapbook.”

It was a few years later that Hudspeth really decided that being a wildlife photographer

Joe Mac with his Granddaughter Laine.



could become a reality. One frosty morning, Hudspeth and some friends were headed out on a hunting trip when he spotted something near the road. Armed with his trusty camera, Hudspeth jumped out to capture an image of his prey.

“I spotted this small screech owl asleep in a honeysuckle thicket,” Hudspeth said. “I got out my camera and eased up about five feet from the owl to take a few pictures, and that was really my first wildlife image. I swore from that day on that I was going to save up all of my nickels and dimes to buy myself a good camera.”

After what seemed like a lifetime, Hudspeth had finally saved up enough to purchase his prize. At the age of 30, Hudspeth bought his

first 35 millimeter camera and hit Ross Barnett Reservoir, one of his favorite locations to view and photograph wildlife. Assured that he would soon be on the cover of Ducks Unlimited or Field and Stream, Hudspeth hit the lake, but he soon found out that it might be a little harder than he thought to fulfill his dream. Using his zoom lens, Hudspeth took several rolls of what he believed to be good quality nature shots, but that was not exactly what he found when he received his prints. The ducks looked like little specks on the landscape. Frustrated but determined, Hudspeth stayed at it for a few more years, but he finally threw in the towel.

“I packed all of my expensive camera gear into my expensive camera carrying case and

tossed in the closet, vowing not to give it another thought,” Hudspeth said. “I was finished with it, but my fiancée who is now my wife, Janet, gave me a 70-210 millimeter lens for my birthday. I then turned my attention to creatures that weren’t so skittish, like frogs, butterflies and other types of insects.”

Hudspeth also hit the books, learning all the basics of photography. “I realized that I didn’t know anything about F-stop, shutter speed, aperture, or exposure or any of the basics of photography, and I was determined to change that,” Hudspeth said. Immersing himself in his self-styled study of photography, Hudspeth pored over every photography book he could get his hands on, learning the ins and outs of the finer points of the camera. All that work and studying appears to have paid off as Hudspeth hit the woods with a renewed vigor and insight into wildlife photography, and it has launched him into quite a successful part-time venture.

Once again, Hudspeth hit the swamp determined to capture what he deems to be the most beautiful of waterfowl--the wood duck, but Hudspeth found out that he had a little bit more to learn about his chosen hobby. This time, he discovered that he would have to learn a little more about the habits and nature of the wildlife he was pursuing.

“Joe Mac’s passion for both our natural resources and his photography is evident in each photo. He takes the time to get to know the animal’s habitat and behavior prior to photographing. His photographs portray the animal in its environment and captures its personality,” Starnes said.

Back on the lake, Hudspeth discovered that he was going to have to get up a little bit earlier to capture his prey on film because the wood ducks showed up at the lake at the crack of dawn. Hudspeth discovered that wood ducks were not so cooperative. Despite the beautiful images that he could visualize in his mind, the ducks wouldn’t perch just so on the cypress limb. They were more prone to congregate in area a little bit out of his camera range. But, Hudspeth is anything but a quitter and was not going to be outdone by these ducks. He began to construct a blind in which he could sit in the water and view the ducks without bringing a lot of attention to himself. Hudspeth experimented with PVC, pipes, netting, and conduit until he constructed the perfect blind that would camouflage him a bit while he waited for the ducks to arrive. From his blind, Hudspeth began his wait for the ducks to come into his field of vision, but he noticed that the ducks preferred a different location.

“That’s when ol’ Joe Mac got wise,” Hudspeth said. “I set up my blind where the ducks liked to swim and hang out, and they got accustomed to the blind. It wasn’t too long before the ducks started to congregate closer to me, and one even flew up on my blind.”



Joe Mac will do whatever it takes to get the shot.



This image was chosen as the official 2012 Mississippi Duck Stamp

Joe Mac caught a great shot of this alligator as it grabbed a fish for a quick snack.



That fateful day, Hudspeth shot about ten rolls of film--more than he had taken in the previous three years. This time when he received his slides back, he was not disappointed. The images were gorgeous and are a beautiful addition to Hudspeth's catalog of work.

Hudspeth has a wonderful way of recounting his adventures in the wild. He can weave a tale just as good as Mark Twain and Jerry Clower, putting you right there in the brush or swamp beside him. Then, when you look at his images, the scene is brought out in stunning three dimensional fashion, and you'll swear that you can smell the honeysuckle blowing in the breeze and the fresh, clean smell of newly fallen rain. Hudspeth's stories of his adventures in the wild are just as interesting as his images, but when he is in the wild, Hudspeth prefers to be just out of the local field of vision.

Hudspeth is mostly overlooked by the local wildlife, but there are times when he has encountered some creatures that don't consider him to be a friendly visitor. For a while, Hudspeth took a little gun with him in case he came across a snake or two, but he learned that

they would leave him alone as long as he didn't bother them. Now, Hudspeth carries a strong six foot stick that he calls "a great equalizer" that he uses to beat away snakes or other critters that don't take to kindly to him being in their neck of the woods.

Still, there have been instances where Hudspeth has been sent packing by the local wildlife. Hudspeth was pushing off the banks of the Reservoir when he noticed about a twelve foot alligator eyeing him in the water. Hudspeth didn't think much about him until he realized that the alligator was charging his way, rippling up the water as he neared his target of Hudspeth. "I realized it might be time for me to get on out of the way, and let the gator have the lake," Hudspeth said. Cautiously, Hudspeth started to back away, heading back to the bank but steadily snapping off pictures. Just as Hudspeth had taken his last frame and his film was rewinding, the alligator lunged up out of the water.

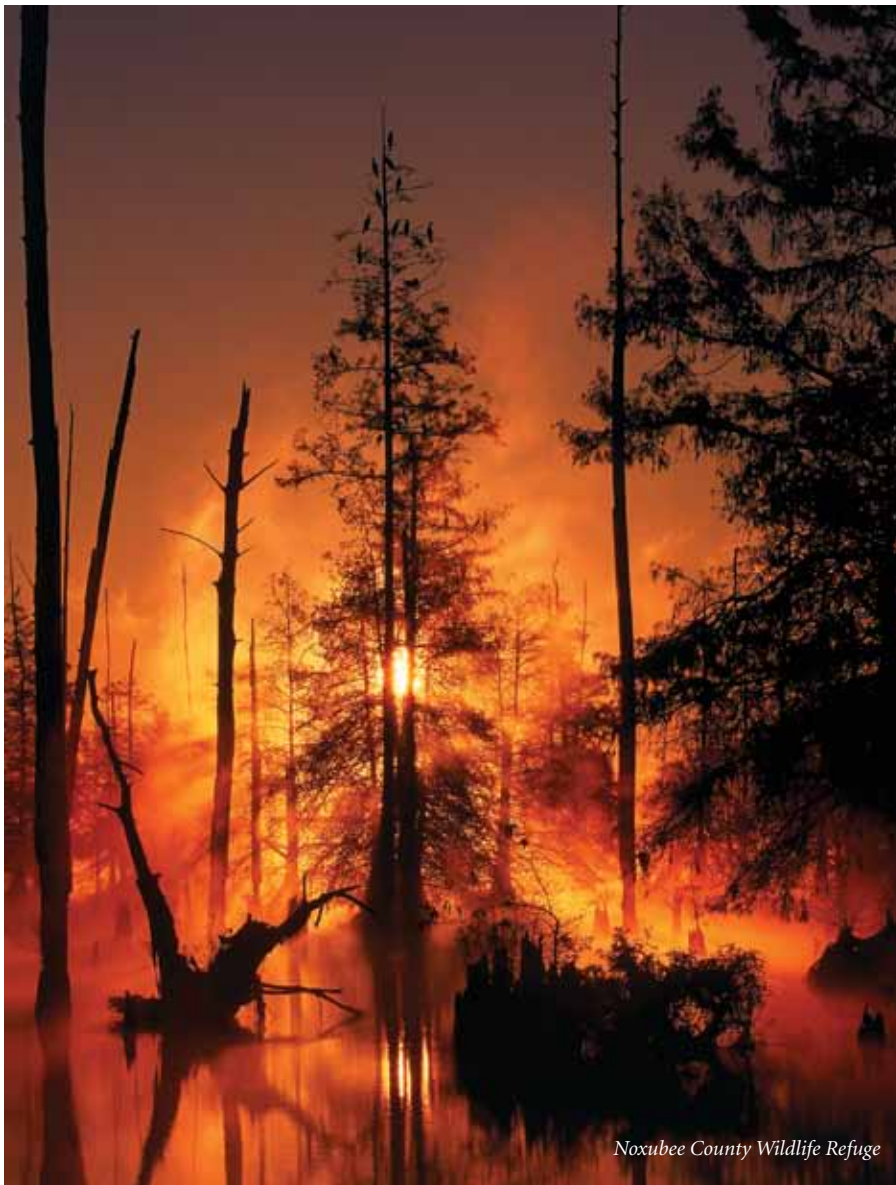
"When he lunged up, I saw about an eight pound catfish hanging out of either side of his mouth, and there I was out of film," Hudspeth said. "That was the time that I really felt like

crying, but I was brave and didn't."

That memory stands out among the images of "the ones that got away." He has many of those tales, but he doesn't dwell on those times. He has built a beautiful portfolio of plenty of gorgeous images that reflect the beauty and majesty of Mississippi wildlife, and his work is constantly receiving attention and its just rewards.

In 1993, Hudspeth's rare image of the immature least bittern, hiding under a lotus leaf, received the Grand Prize for Wildlife by the Roger Tory Peterson Institute for Natural History. Ironically, that nationally acclaimed photo was shot after Hudspeth had met with little success photographing wood ducks and was packing it up for the day. As gale winds blew through the area, Hudspeth spotted the bittern, pulled on his waders, and was able to get a few good shots before the bird flew off. This was yet another instance of Hudspeth being in the right place at the right time, and the nation took notice of this rare picture. Hudspeth's photos appeared in magazines across the nation.

Hudspeth's gorgeous images have received



many an accolade and have been featured in his first compilation, *In the Southern Wild*, published by the University Press in 2003. In 2011, Hudspeth added to his photographic collection with his self-published *Return to the Southern Wild*. Both of Hudspeth's book feature breathtaking images of the Mississippi landscape and wildlife. The cover image of his second book is extremely popular and has received the honor of being produced as a Ducks Unlimited banquet print. Hudspeth is already hard at work on his next collection of photographs and expects the new book to be published in 2014.

Hudspeth's photography is so powerful, drawing viewers in and capturing their imagination with vivid images of places and creatures that many people will never come in contact with. Hudspeth's photographs evoke deep and strong emotions in all viewers. Starnes' favorite photograph by Hudspeth is one that he took of a sunrise in the woods, giving off a glow as if the sunrise were

fire. "The sun's rays shine through the trees so brightly. It is a gorgeous shot!" Starnes said. "I love pictures that really pop with color and catch my eye. This picture does just that. It makes me want to be in that very spot and experience first-hand a moment like the one he photographed."

While many people aren't able to experience those moments, that is where Hudspeth so effectively steps in, bringing his adventures and wonderful talents to the table. Ad man for RPM trucking magazine by day, this Brandon resident can be found in the wild anytime he has a free moment. Even though wildlife photography may seem like a dream job, Hudspeth admits that most times it's not so glamorous.

"There's lots of time spent waiting for the animals to arrive or the sun to be just right, and sometimes I won't even take a picture that whole time," Hudspeth said. "It can be cold and damp, but I enjoy it. I can go hunting with my camera anytime of the year despite

what season it is. That's really what I'm doing is hunting but instead of a gun or bow and arrow, I hunt with my camera. My favorite times of the year are from February to April when I have the woods to myself. This is my R and R, and it allows me to get my feet muddy.

It takes a lot of work and study, finding where and when the wildlife will show, but Hudspeth finds joy in doing his homework, scouting out the new spots or wildlife locales. When Hudspeth decided to photograph turkeys, he found out that he needed to learn how to hunt them so that he could photograph them. During the last week of turkey season, Hudspeth spotted a turkey strut zone and returned to the area the next week.

"A turkey strut zone is basically like a guy that thinks he's a stud and struts around in the bar, trying to get all the ladies to notice him," Hudspeth said with a laugh. "That's what the male turkeys are doing--strutting around trying to get the attention of the hens and wanting to hook up. When I went back that next week, the turkeys were strutting about 25 to 30 yards of me."

Hudspeth observed one beautiful turkey, strutting up and down the turkey strut zone from about 6 a.m. to 9 a.m., and then he would leave--just like clockwork. On the third day, the turkey had been there for about two hours when it stopped and perked up. Hudspeth was afraid that he had spooked the turkey, but he noticed the turkey was eyeing something up the hill. There stood a mean looking turkey with a "Yeah, I'm bad" look in his eyes. As Mr. Bad News turkey strutted come down the hill, the other bird made tracks out of the turkey strut zone, preferring to leave the area rather than deal with the turkey with the bad attitude.

"That was really something to see. It was obvious to see which one was the dominate male," Hudspeth said. "I photographed that turkey as well, and you can see in his eyes that he means business. Overall, I took about 800 photos of various turkeys over a three-day period."

Starnes is a big fan of the impressive turkey strut zone photo because Hudspeth has brought an element of humor to the photo. "It is priceless! It has a comical appeal," Starnes said. "It just needs the punch line to go with it!" Starnes is very appreciative of Hudspeth's big heart and generous nature. When the Mississippi Wildlife Federation was moving to a new office, Hudspeth brought his photographs for them to peruse, letting them choose the ones that they would like to display in their office. "Needless to say, our office is beautiful!" Starnes said.

Often, Hudspeth is approached by newcomers to the photography field, seeking advice from the seasoned veteran. Hudspeth always suggests that a successful wildlife photographer has to do plenty of research on

the finer points of this type of photography as well as the habits of the animals that they want to shoot. Hudspeth also cautions that photographers new to the field should be prepared to spend most of their time scouting out locations where animals congregate in the wild, and he is quick to put to rest the idea that a photographer needs the most expensive equipment on the market.

"You just need a few basics--a good camera, good lens, and tripod," Hudspeth said. "You might find out that you need other things like waders or a boat, but you've got to be pretty careful with your equipment. Don't let it get

out the colorful fall foliage, turtles sunning themselves at the Noxubee Refuge, blue herons and snowy egrets, and gallinules are just a few of the iconic images that depict Hudspeth's love for nature and his home state. Hudspeth has a very unique talent of depicting a little piece of Southern heaven in all of his timeless pieces. Starnes is appreciative of Hudspeth's work because he has given many a look into an unknown and undiscovered world.

"His work has provided so much insight into the waterfowl world. His photographs allow us a chance to see moments that most of us wouldn't get an opportunity to see,"

love to spend more time shooting at the Singing River in Pascagoula and the hills and cliffs of Northeast Mississippi, and so many other places in Mississippi that I haven't been able to spend as much time in as I'd like. I find that people like to have a photograph of places that they know. It makes those images special to them. I fully intend to travel throughout our great state, taking in the local scenery and animals and photographing them the best that I can. I am so proud to be from Mississippi, and I want to represent that in my photos as I travel around the state to all the beautiful



wet because a camera has only one bath a lifetime."

Hudspeth urges new photographers to get as close as possible to their subjects so that the image fills the frame. He doesn't rely on programs, such as Photoshop, to enhance or to try to fix images. "You can't fix broke," Hudspeth said. "You've got to have a really good, sharp image because no computer program out there can fix an image effectively. A sharp, close image is the foundation of your work, and more than anything you've got to find out where the wildlife congregates."

Hudspeth's images are so powerful and beautiful, bringing a greater appreciation to the gorgeous Mississippi landscape and his wild inhabitants. The very talented Hudspeth has brought to life magnificent images of our home state. His images of a raccoon peeking

Starnes said. "Moments such as diving, feeding, or preening would go unnoticed by most people without photographers like Joe Mac who thrive on the thrill of the hunt! They just hunt with a camera instead of a gun."

Lately, Hudspeth's favorite wildlife subject is his three-year-old granddaughter Lainey, and he loves spending time with her in her natural habitat. As retirement seems a ways off, Hudspeth has engaged dreams of spending his free days photographing wildlife from dawn to dusk, but even though he has spent time photographing scenic locations out of state, he hasn't done so in about 10 years and plans to stay right here in the Magnolia State to do most of his photographic shooting.

"There are so many beautiful and interesting places in the state that I haven't had a chance to explore, yet," Hudspeth said. "I'd

landscapes and creatures that call this their home. I can't think of a better way to spend my free time."

Mississippi might just enlist Hudspeth's service in future public relations and tourism campaigns. For more than 30 years, Hudspeth has brought to life images of golden sunsets, dew kissed trees leaning down to meet the iridescent sparkles of a proud wood duck as he preens for a brand new day, and the shadowy elegance of a misty lake, shrouded in Spanish moss and fog. Hudspeth's work is a testament to the beauty, mystery, and majesty that can be found in the Mississippi wildlife. Hudspeth's impressive images speak for themselves, and speak of the wonderful accolades that have been bestowed upon this hardworking, self schooled wildlife photographer who has a knack for capturing the true essence of his love of nature. "I take every opportunity I can to promote the beauty of our great state," Hudspeth said.

Hudspeth's love for Mississippi are evident throughout his work and greatly appreciated by many. In the forward of Hudspeth's Return to the Southern Wild, former Mississippi Game and Fish Commissioner Billy Joe Cross marveled at Hudspeth's ability to capture the beauty of his state in his photographs. "Joe Mac has a sincere love for Mississippi wildlife and the special places he's captured on film," Cross said. "His images of wildlife remind all of us why we cherish Mississippi's natural resources." - **MSM**