





Joe Mac Hudspeth

Capturing the Southern Wild

Joe Mac Hudspeth grew up hunting and fishing in the hills of northern Mississippi.

“On my trips into the woods, I always carried a camera to take photos of the deer my friends and I harvested,” said the now Brandon resident.

Hudspeth has always had a love for nature and the outdoors. On one of those hunting trips, his encounter with an owl allowed him the first opportunity to photograph the beauty of the outdoors.

“One frigid January morning as I was returning from a hunt, a slight movement in a honeysuckle thicket caught my attention,” said Hudspeth. “Moving in for a closer look, I discovered a screech owl sunning himself. When the little fellow allowed me to get within two

Photography by Joe Mac Hudspeth



feet of him, I took my very first wildlife photograph.”

At that moment, Hudspeth said he had never heard of shutter speeds, f-stops or aperture, and he did not know that his camera would not focus at that close range.

The experience, however, sparked a fire that continues to burn inside him today.

About 10 years later, Hudspeth had saved enough money to buy his first 35 mm camera. Hudspeth said he was sure the zoom lens would let him photograph wood ducks and mallards from the window of his car without getting his feet muddy, he laughed.

Hudspeth spent time on the shores of the Ross Barnett Reservoir photographing waterfowl.

“I believed in my heart that the

ducks in the final prints would be ten times larger than they were in the viewfinder of the camera,” he said. “Of course, they weren’t.”

Discouraged, Hudspeth placed all of his equipment in its case and stashed it in the closet.

Two years later Hudspeth received a macro lens for his birthday. Motivated once again to photograph wildlife up close, he decided to take a different approach.

“I bought and studied books on wildlife photography,” he said.

The macro lens encouraged Hudspeth to stalk smaller subjects such as frogs, turtles, lizards and butterflies. Practicing on those smaller subjects gave Hudspeth the ability to hone in on his photography skills. He then targeted sunrises, sunsets, wildflowers, spider webs and fall leaves.

After the purchase of an even larger lens, Hudspeth focused his attention on one of his favorite subjects -- the wood duck.

“In my opinion the wood duck is the most beautiful of all ducks, but I soon realized that even with the big lens I had to be less than 20 feet from the ducks to get the full-frame photographs that I so desperately wanted.”

To get close to his subjects, Hudspeth designed a lightweight blind which he placed in an abandoned beaver dam. Still too far away, he discovered that the ducks were not fearful of the blind so he moved it closer to the spot where the ducks returned at dawn each day.

After leaving the blind in the spot closer to the ducks for several weeks, Hudspeth returned one morning with excitement to see







what he would find.

"I watched that beaver dam come alive at 5:50 a.m. with at least 20 ducks arriving on cue and landing mere feet away. One actually came to rest on top of my blind," he said with excitement.

The wood ducks fed and preened for the next hour and a half while he waited for enough sunlight to capture them on film. That morning Hudspeth took 10 rolls of film, quite an accomplishment since he had only taken a total of three rolls of film the previous year.

As his photos improved, he began submitting them for publication. Many long months later, quite unexpectedly, he received two magazines in the mail that featured his photographs -- one on the back cover and the other on the front cover.

"It was then that I decided that I

could do it," said Hudspeth.

Hudspeth's photos have appeared on 14 Mississippi Duck Stamps and 16 Mississippi Sportsman's licenses.

Since then, Hudspeth has spent many hours photographing blue-winged teals and alligators on the Ross Barnett Reservoir; wood storks and turtles at the Noxubee Refuge near Louisville; anhinga and snowy egrets at Tara Wildlife on Eagle Lake and wood ducks and great blue herons at Springdale Refuge and Sardis Reservoir close to his childhood home in Oxford. Hudspeth has also had the opportunity on certain occasions to photograph deer and turkeys.

Hudspeth's photos have been published in magazines, newspapers and books. In fact, his first book was published in 2004, *In the*

Southern Wild, by University Press.

His second book, *Return to the Southern Wild*, is filled with photographs of wildlife and scenery shot by Hudspeth over a span of 25 years in Mississippi.

The book contains 144 full color pages of Mississippi scenery, deer, ducks, turkeys, gators, gallinules and other wildlife that are sure to appeal to those who love the outdoors.

In fact, Hudspeth's cover photo on the book won him the honor of having it produced as a Ducks Unlimited banquet print.

As his photography has attracted more and more attention, Hudspeth is frequently asked what expeditions he has planned for the future.

"I expect that in the future, I will see what more can be found in my view from the blind."—OS