

# DeSoto

JULY 2012

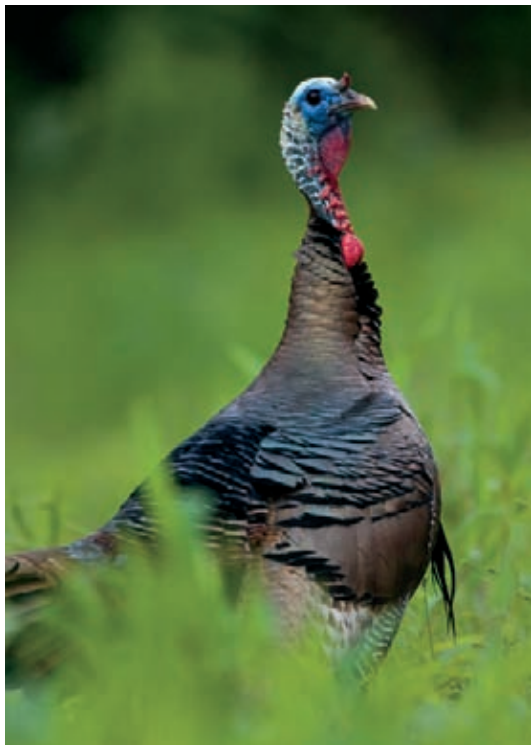
*Exploring the South*

Return to the Southern Wild with Joe Mac Hudspeth

**Harpo the Dancing Chef**

The Legacy of Mississippi's American Indians





## JOE MAC HUDSPETH: Capturing the Southern Wilds

Text by Judy Smith

Photography courtesy of Joe Mac Hudspeth, Jr.

The sky glows a golden orange as the dark silhouette of cypress trees stands as a backdrop for the gentle mist rising off the waters. Silence surrounds the swamp, and Spanish moss blows to and fro in the breeze as the trees cast huge shadows in the murky water below. A wood duck swims peacefully by, unaware of being observed on such a tranquil morning.

Such are the beautiful images captured by the lens of wildlife photographer Joe Mac Hudspeth, Jr. Hudspeth has photographed iconic images that depict the beauty of the Southern landscape and the wild creatures that grace Mississippi and beyond.

For over twenty years, Hudspeth has brought out his love of the beauty in nature and respect for its inhabitants in all of his work. Most people are



familiar with his work, and some even carry it around with them every day. Since 1997, Hudspeth has done the photography for all sixteen sportsman, game, and fishing licenses in the state. This year, Hudspeth will release his fifteenth duck stamp, each image depicting the beauty and grace of various types of ducks found in the state.

Looking at his body of work, it's hard to believe that Hudspeth had no formal photographic training. This Oxford native grew up with a love for the great outdoors, while hunting and fishing in the woods of North Mississippi. Throughout all of those trips, there was one thing that Hudspeth never left the house without: his Kodak 110 Instamatic camera that he used to document the haul for the day. Hudspeth always loved wildlife photography but never really considered himself a true wildlife photographer until one eventful morning. With a chill in the Mississippi









air, Hudspeth and some friends were headed out to do some hunting, but something caught his eye.

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

At the age of thirty, Hudspeth purchased his first thirty-five-millimeter camera and hit Ross Barnett Reservoir, one of his favorite locations to observe nature. Set on fulfilling his dream of becoming a wildlife photographer, Hudspeth took a few rolls of film, confident that he would soon be on the cover of Ducks Unlimited or Field and Stream, but that would not be the case. Using his zoom lens, Hudspeth thought that he could get a good image, but the ducks looked like little specks on the landscape. Hudspeth tried his hand at wildlife photography for a few more weeks, but soon became disgusted with his work.

"I packed all my camera gear up and put it in the closet, vowing not to give it another thought, but my then-fiancee gave me a 70-210 millimeter lens for my

birthday," Hudspeth said. "I then turned my attention to frogs, butterflies, and other types of insects that weren't so skittish."

Hudspeth also immersed himself in the basics of photography, poring over photography books to learn about the basics of shutter speed, exposure, and other elements of photography. That work must have paid off, and Hudspeth credits a little bit of luck and patience for leading him to his successful venture into wildlife photography.

Once again, Hudspeth hit the reservoir, this time determined to photograph the wood duck, but he would have to learn a few valuable lessons before he would get the results that he wanted. Hudspeth found out that the ducks would not perch just so on the cypress limb like he envisioned, and they got there at the crack of dawn. Determined not to be outdone, Hudspeth constructed a camouflage blind out of PVC pipes and netting, and set it up where he wanted to see the ducks, but the birds still would not cooperate.

"Ol' Joe Mac got wise, then," Hudspeth said. "I got there about thirty minutes before daybreak and set up my blind where they would always hang out. It wasn't long after that the ducks



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started to congregate close to me, and one even flew up on my blind.”

That day, Hudspeth took about 10 rolls of film, more than he had taken in the three years previous. The images were gorgeous, and as they say, the rest is history. Now, Hudspeth’s work can be viewed in various magazines, and he even has two books devoted to his imagery: *In the Southern Wild* and *Return to the Southern Wild*. Whenever Hudspeth isn’t at his “real job” in Jackson, it’s a pretty safe bet that you’ll find him sloshing around in the swamps or paddling out on the lake in his little kayak. He just loves nature and can’t get enough of it.

Although Hudspeth has a great love of nature and all manner of wildlife, there have been a couple of times when alligators got a little too close for his liking. While pushing off the bank at the reservoir, Hudspeth noticed an alligator with its entire frame nearly out of the water. “I could see every bit of him, from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail and everything in between, and it was then that I noticed him charging in my direction,” Hudspeth said. “I decided that I needed to get on out and let him have the lake.”

Still, Hudspeth kept snapping photos as he backed away, but he was heartbroken when he experienced “the one that got away.” Just as Hudspeth had used up all his film, the twelve-foot alligator stretched up out of the water, revealing an eight-pound catfish hanging out of his mouth. Now, Hudspeth gives plenty of space to alligators over nine feet long and carries what he calls “a great equalizer” — a strong six-foot stick that he uses to beat away snakes or any other critters that might not take too kindly to his intrusion into their woods.

Even though wildlife photography is not always glamorous, as many hours are spent shivering in the water or woods waiting for the wildlife to appear, Hudspeth said that his pastime offers many advantages over hunting or fishing.

“I can go hunting for deer or turkey with my camera anytime,” Hudspeth said. “My favorite times of the year are from February to April when I have the woods to myself. This is my R and R. It lets me get my feet muddy.” ■

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