

Passion and Photography

Meet Hermann Kopf



by Sharleen Nelson Bolkan

An intrinsic appreciation of the natural world around him came to Hermann Kopf at an early age: "I did a lot of hiking in Austria," he said. "There were big mountain goats up on top of the rocks in the upper elevations and that's what triggered my interest in wildlife." However, his aptitude at capturing the wildlife he loved on film came more by accident than by design. According to Kopf, his mother ordered a rudimentary camera from a mail-order house, but she wasn't pleased with it when it arrived. Kopf took the discarded camera and began shooting pictures of the wildlife he encountered while hiking. "My pictures came out so much better

than my friends," he said. "And that's how I got interested in photography." What began in his teens with a passion for wildlife and a simple camera has led Kopf on an exploratory journey around the world.

Two destinations in particular have made lasting impressions on Kopf—Masai Mara in Kenya and Katmai, Alaska. The opportunity to capture the stunning abundance of wildlife in Kenya occurs every year when wildebeests and close to a million zebras migrate across the plains from the Serengeti into Kenya and Masai Mara. "Basically, they are following the green grass," Kopf said. "And along with the abundance of wildebeests and the zebras come the lions, the leopards and, of course, the cheetahs to the plains. Those are the ones that prey on that type of animal. It's incredible, really." In Kenya, Kopf also had the opportunity to observe and photograph the birth of a gazelle from beginning to end. "It was unbelievable. Those are the kinds of experiences that stay with you for the rest of your life."

Kopf uses a high-end, 16.4-megapixel Canon D1S Mark 2 digital camera to capture the stately beauty of the animals up close and personal. Although he uses a zoom lens, patience, and an ability to gain the trust of the animal, is essential. "Basically, you go there and you sit for some time. It could be a half hour or 45 minutes, until the animal gets to like you (or) gets familiar with you, and feels that you are no longer a threat to him," he said.

Danger is always a factor around wild animals. Kopf admits to a few close calls, but said they were primarily due to human error—something that caused the animal to react in a more aggressive way that it normally would. "I believe that wildlife is not out there to kill you, but they will defend themselves," he said. Kopf's 14-year-old son often accompanies him on trips, but he avoids taking him on hikes where there might be wild bears or mountain lions.

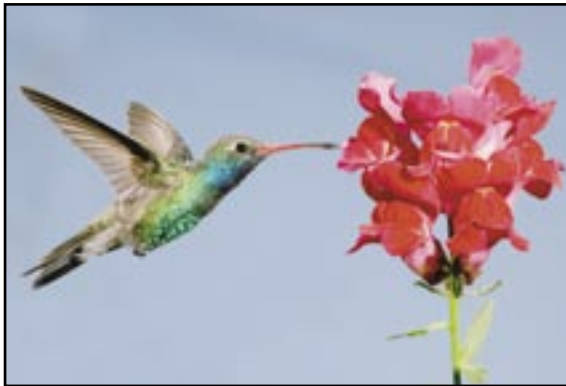


Photographing wild animals may seem risky, but Kopf faced an even greater danger—cancer. Two and a half years ago, he was diagnosed with lymphoma. After undergoing six months of chemo treatments, he was referred to the UCSD Cancer Center in San Diego for stem cell treatment. The aggressive treatment involves the harvesting of new cells to replace the cancerous cells. During the harvesting process, Kopf was hooked to a machine for three days for eight hours at a time. “All of the old cells die off and the new cells take place, which is a miracle,” he said. He recalls waking up later and thinking, “Wow, I’m still here. I feel so good.”

The experience provided Kopf with not only a renewed appreciation and passion for wild-

life, but life in general. “I thank the Almighty everyday that I’m here,” he said. “Obviously, your outlook on life changes completely. Whatever was important doesn’t seem as important anymore.” In November, an exhibition of Kopf’s wild landscapes opened at the CJ Gallery in San Diego. A portion of the proceeds from the event went to UCSD Cancer Center to further cancer research and treatment.

Healthy and cancer free, he will soon embark on another adventure. This time the destination is Bosque del Apache, New Mexico, where some 40,000 snow geese spend the winter. At sunrise, the geese coordinate their takeoff within seconds of one another. “It’s quite spectacular,” he said. “It’s noisy and they darken the



sky, hopefully against a beautiful sunrise." In addition to the snow geese, Kopf will be photographing the 15,000 Sandhill cranes that spend the night on the safety of the marshes. "They fly out at sunrise to the fields to feed and then return at sunset again," he said. "Their takeoff, of course, is different from the snow geese because they go off in small groups rather than in one unit, so their takeoff can take anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half."

In addition to traveling, he is working on a children's book based on his experience photographing a cheetah family in Kenya. Kopf joined a film crew from the BBC and observed a cheetah mother and her two cubs. "We experienced a hunt where the cheetah mama caught a baby gazelle and she didn't harm it; she just caught it. And she apparently released it so her cubs could learn how to catch her," he said. "Training went on for about an hour. They would never hurt the little gazelle, the gazelle was just exhausted. She couldn't walk anymore and she couldn't stand up. But those cheetahs would never hurt her. And obviously for that little gazelle it was a horrible experience. We felt very sorry for her, but we were able to get some incredible photographs."

Kopf enjoys traveling within the United States, as well. On a trip through Oregon a few years ago, he made a stop at Marathon's headquarters in Coburg. After talking with salesman Rod Johnston, Kopf purchased a Marathon coach. "We used to own a competitor's coach until we met with Rod. We talked with him about odds and ends, and that's how we got exposed to Marathon. Rod has been a great friend to us ever since. Because of that little coincidence of stopping in at Marathon, we ended up buying a



Marathon coach."

Kopf equips his coach with his photography gear, as well as a computer and printer. He also uses the coach to travel to Montana and Wyoming every year—in the spring to observe and photograph the newborns in the wild, and in the fall for the breeding season and fall colors. "One of my dreams is to take the coach to Alaska all the way up to Homer, which is about three hours south of Anchorage, and spend the summer there."

Although travel and photography play a significant role in his life, both are secondary to Kopf's true passion. "I don't particular like taking the pictures as much because of the photography end of it," he said. "It's because of the passion that I have for nature. I love to be out in nature, preferably by myself or with a friend or two that share the same interest."

Fortunately, the rest of us can appreciate the splendor of nature and its majestic wildlife through Hermann Kopf's extraordinary photographs.

Beginning in February, Kopf's wildlife photography went on permanent display at the Artworks ETC Gallery in La Mesa, California. For more information, visit the gallery's website at www.artworksfineart.com. If you run across Hermann on the road or at a rally in the future, sit down and visit with him about two of his passions—wildlife and photography. •