



Dwight Dyke

A Photographer's Journey

by
Clarke C. Jones

Photographs by Dwight Dyke

“I really wasn’t thinking when I asked the handlers to take the chain leash off the 400-pound Bengal tiger. When I was younger and trying to make it as a photographer, I was so intent on getting an unusual shot or something that was just out of the norm, I often put myself into some difficult situations. I was frustrated that I could not get a shot of the semi-tame tiger without the collar around its neck showing up in the shot. Both handlers asked me if I was sure I wanted to do that, and I figured we are walking around with the thing so it must be

OK. Once the tiger was released it went down to the nearby river and started swimming. I took some shots of it swimming but began to notice its personality began to seem less tame. The two handlers were standing beside me with lead pipes in case the big cat started misbehaving. Something annoyed the tiger, and he came roaring out of the water and charged us. Both handlers ran and I froze. Fortunately the big cat went after the handlers, and I was able to extricate myself cautiously.”

It may be hard to imagine that this man is one of the most prolific photogra-

phers in the calendar business—a man whose calendar pictures of puppies and kittens and other warm fuzzy animals decorate offices and kitchens around the world. He has been chased by an elk, nearly stomped to death by javelinas, dodged rattlesnakes, and found himself alone—eye-to-eye—with a bear in the Montana wilderness. It’s all about the photograph to Goochland resident and internationally recognized photographer Dwight Dyke.

Dyke, who grew up in Richmond, Virginia, began working as a project manager for an advertising firm in the Upper



Midwest. One of his first jobs was traveling around the country with an art director and a photographer, producing photos for scenic checks. He bought a 35mm Nikon to take along on the trips so he could take his own photos. He observed the photographer on the project and thoroughly enjoyed tak-

ing pictures. By the end of the assignment, he was taking pictures for the company. "I never had a lesson and didn't know enough about photography to know what I wasn't supposed to do. I took pictures differently and my pictures had a bolder look because of it."

Within two years of his first foray into photography, Dyke's life changed. "I found myself single and examining my life," he said. He acquired a large-format camera, the kind with the black cloth hood that goes over the photographer's head, hitched a pop-up camper to his jeep and went on the road for two years. He spent some time on the Navajo Indian Reservation at Canyon de Chelly in Arizona, then moved on to photograph the rest of the country, depending on what the seasons offered an outdoor photographer.

He traveled to the Everglades in February because many species of birds congregate there during that time of year. "Every insect that can bite you seemed to congregate there as well," he recalls. It was in the Everglades that he came upon an alligator nest with baby alligators huddled on top. "I wanted this shot of a baby gator sitting on a lily pad, but the mother was pretty close by. An anhinga made the mistake of diving too close to the mother alligator, which went down after it. That gave me time to pick up one of the babies, place it on a lily pad and take the shot. I'm not saying it is one of the smartest things I have ever done, but the photo got published."

In Virginia, Dyke's photography has covered the state, everything from the Fiddlers Convention in Galax to fiddler crabs on the beaches of the Atlantic. If you purchase pictorial calendars, you most likely have seen his work—calendars of tulips, country churches, European castles, tropical birds, Southern wildflowers, dogs, cats, barns and tropical sunsets.

One of his objectives is to narrow the subject matter to what would be interesting to the viewer. "By looking at your subject from every possible angle, you will improve your chances of a good shot. If you started out as I did, taking photos with a 4x5 field camera that showed the subject upside down and backwards, the process of seeing the subject differently comes easily," notes Dyke.

When Dyke takes pictures he is







very much in the here and now and focused on his work. Sometimes that makes things awkward for both Dyke and his subjects. “If you have ever been around me while I am working, you might notice I tend to forget the names of people I have just met whom I may be actually shooting. This is because I am concentrating on where they should be, where the light is and what shadows may be in the shot.” He recounts, “I was taking pictures of a beautiful Tudor estate in Richmond called Agecroft Hall. It was to show a number of women in 16th century period clothing working in the gardens at Agecroft. I had to stand on a wall to get the shots I needed. I was having difficulty keeping my balance while directing the ladies where to stand. Because I had—within minutes of meeting these ladies—forgotten their names, I started moving

them around by yelling out the garden implement each was holding. I would say ‘OK, rake! Move a little to the left. You, shovel, move to the right! Broom, stand still!’ The lady with the hoe stood up and said, ‘Don’t you even think about it!’ ”

Technology, as Dyke has discovered, can be a fickle mistress. At the advent of the digital era, everything changed. It wasn’t, however, until the companies that printed his work went to digital processing that he realized he too must change. “All of a sudden I had cameras that were—almost overnight—worthless and a library of approximately 250,000 slides, but publishers were not processing slides any more. Just to stay in the business, I had to make a huge dollar investment in new cameras and computer equipment and literally spent every day for four months trying to catch up

to the new technology.” With continual dedication to learning digital technology and months spent with a computer instructor, Dyke has been able to keep his business going.

Wendover Brown of Brown Trout Publishing, one of the largest publishers of titled calendars in the world, sees Dyke as one of the company’s primary contacts for dog calendars; his work would otherwise have been missed. She, along with her husband Marc and his twin brother Mike, has run Brown Trout for 24 years. Some people buy calendars because they like the scene or the location. However, Brown points out that people who buy dog calendars are breed-specific, meaning that when they buy a dog calendar, they want one featuring the breed they have or like. “Dwight is both a professional and an artist,” says Wendover.



“We never have to check the technical aspect of his work.”

Barb Hales, former dog editor for *Brown Trout*, says, “Dwight’s photography is unique and he is able to produce very vivid colors from his photos. I believe his love of animals comes through in all his animal photography. He has a knack of getting his dogs to pose just the right way to make them look happy.”

When asked why he has become so successful with his photography, Dyke explains it this way: “When I first started out, I would do anything for a good photo and often forsook safety. I have mellowed some. However, if you want to get ahead in this business or any other business, you will

have to give up a lot. As in any successful venture, you have to make a number of sacrifices and stay focused on your objective. I am fortunate that I picked a career that gives me the opportunity to do each day what I love doing. The only master plan I have ever had is to get everything I can out of each day in terms of experience and happiness.”

Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends his spare time hunting up good stories with his black Lab, Luke. You can visit both Jones and Luke on their Web site at www.clarkecjones.com.