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**Making luck happen—naturally**

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# George Lepp

Making luck happen - naturally

*In a remarkable career spanning more than 30 years, George Lepp has created many thousands of phenomenal nature photographs and educated and inspired just as many photographers.*

*by Ethan G. Salwen*

**“When I immerse myself in something,** I give it everything that I have,” says George Lepp, who has been giving his all to nature photography for more than 30 years. Lepp is one of North America’s best-known nature photographers. His work has appeared in *National Wildlife*, *Natural History*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and scores of other publications.

Lepp has produced a number of books, including *The Golden Poppies of California* and *Beyond the Basics: Innovative Techniques for Nature Photography*. He is the field editor of both *Outdoor Photographer* and *PCPhoto*, where his monthly columns reach a million readers. And as a photographic educator, Lepp is in a class of his own.

“George engages nature with his photography the same way he engages photography itself and teaching—full on and without reservations,” says Rob Sheppard, editor-at-large for *Outdoor Photographer*. “His work is positive and celebratory of the natural world.” Indeed, one of the most striking things revealed in talking extensively with the 63-year-old Lepp is that his attitude is utterly enthusiastic.

“You’ve got to make luck happen,” Lepp says about the amount of time and hard work that can go into creating a single, stunning nature photograph. But this sentiment can just as easily be applied to the professional odyssey of George Lepp, who has remained passionately and persistently dedicated to creating meaningful and beautiful images of the natural world and to helping other photographers do the same.

### **Early exposure to nature and photography**

George Lepp was born in 1944 in Ontario, Canada, to German immigrants who were driven out of their adopted country, Russia, by the Bolshevik Revolution. “Canada was the only country that would accept them,” says Lepp. When Lepp was five, the family moved to Sanger,



California, near Fresno, to join other family members who had already made a home there.

Lepp inherited a strong work ethic from his blue-collar parents. His father was a tool-and-die maker and his mother worked various jobs, from packing fruit to managing a department at K-Mart. "They were very, very busy simply making a living," Lepp notes. "And they didn't have time to encourage me in activities like photography."

Lepp credits two uncles for helping him develop his strong love of the outdoors. They were not much older than Lepp, and they took him along on hiking and fishing trips. One of them introduced Lepp to photography. "He was doing all these wonderful things with photography and I would look over his shoulder," Lepp recalls.

Still, it wasn't until the fifth grade that Lepp's photographic activities began in earnest, if accidentally. The principal of his middle school, Mr. Johnson, tapped the 10-year-old Lepp to photograph for the school's faculty newspaper. "I'm still not sure why he picked me," says Lepp. "But it was an incredible immersion in photography for a couple of years."

## **"...the ability to make money from photography was a big part of the attraction from the very beginning."**

Lepp was photographing with a bulky 4x5 Crown Graphic, developing the film, and even making the line graphics. "I wasn't dreaming of being a photographer," he explains. "It was just a lot of fun. Heck, when you're that age, just getting out of class is exciting." Still, not every 10-year-old can handle a 4x5 camera with confidence.

### **Finding his natural direction in high school**

When Lepp was 12, his family moved to Fresno, and he continued to make images with the Contaflex his father bought him. Lepp taught himself by reading books and magazines, and used the family bathroom as a darkroom. In high school he made money by taking family portraits for holiday cards.

"I was excited to have surpassed the skill level of my uncle, whom I looked up to," says Lepp. "Also, the ability to make money from photography was a big part of the attraction from the very beginning. For me, photography became a facilitator at a very young age." Academically, what drove Lepp in high school were the natural sciences. "Ever since my first experiences out of doors with my uncles, I had been intrigued by the natural aspects of the world," Lepp explains. "Photography was secondary at this point in my life. I was going to go to college and get a degree in wildlife biology and then be a park ranger or something."

### **Smoke chasing and studying biology**

Before heading to Oregon State University in Corvallis for his first year of college, Lepp went to Potlach, Idaho, to work as a firefighter. "I did this for three summers, and it gave me incredible confidence out of doors," he recalls. It's easy to see why. These college kids were called "smoke chasers" and worked in pairs. "We received a backpack with three days of food, a chain saw, and a radio the size of a desktop computer," says Lepp. "Then we were given a map with a dot on it, and we had to hike in and put out the fire. A job like that has to build confidence."

In college, Lepp was mostly bored and received average grades. "I couldn't find the relevance between what I was studying in classes and what I would be doing later," he explains. He minored in art, which he did enjoy. "I was always interested in doing scientific illustration as part of my biology studies," says Lepp. "But it was also something that was a little bit more relaxing than my regular studies."

Lepp transferred to Humboldt State in Arcata, California, for his second and third years of college to avoid the out-of-state fees he had to pay in Oregon. His family was unable to finance all of his college education, so Lepp made up the difference by occasionally taking off a semester to work full time.

### **A detour to Vietnam**

Lepp was not pleased when he got drafted in 1965, but true to his nature, he took the experience in stride. "I was aware that more and more people were getting drafted," Lepp recalls. "But it was a Catch-22 situation. You had to be in school full-time to avoid the draft, but I needed to work to stay in school. The minute I took off time to work I was eligible. And sure enough, they got me."

Lepp recalls his induction experience with a few chuckles. "This tough sergeant started yelling at us," Lepp remembers. "He told us that a lot of Marines were being killed in Vietnam. So ten percent of us needed to volunteer to be Marines. No one was sticking up a hand to volunteer, so the sergeant just went down the row and picked every tenth guy. Sure enough, I was 'volunteered.' This situation came with one advantage: You could choose to be in for only two years, knowing that you would be fodder for the front lines, or you could choose to stay in for four years and pick a noncombatant specialty. So I opted for the four years and became an illustrator." Lepp turned misfortune into opportunity.

Lepp spent the first three years of his Marine stint in San Diego and Hawaii. "Then," he says, "Probably because I could not keep my mouth shut about my opposition to the war, I got shipped off to DaNang." Of his time in Vietnam, where he was making presentation materials for the high-ranking officers, Lepp says plainly: "It wasn't a bad situation. I mean, we got rocketed a lot. But it could have been worse."

### **Studying at Brooks**

In 1969, leaving the rocket attacks and the Marines behind, Lepp took advantage of the G.I. Bill to study photography at the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California. Lepp's experience at



Clockwise from top: Parrot Tulip, Rufous Hummingbird and Mt. Mckinley © George Lepp

Brooks was mixed. “I received a really good photography background that I could build on,” he explains. However, his teachers laughed at his notion of becoming a nature photographer—combining photography with his knowledge of natural sciences and his love of the outdoors.

True to form, Lepp forged his own path. “When we got an assignment to do a portrait, I would do a portrait of a hummingbird,” he says. “While I was going to Brooks, I also worked as a volunteer at the Natural History Museum in Santa Barbara. They were very encouraging about my work.” While Lepp helped the museum with its photographic needs, the museum allowed him to use its collection for his photography work. Once again, Lepp was using photography as a facilitator.

At this time, Lepp wasn’t even sure exactly what it meant to be a nature photographer. “But I knew that other people were doing it,” he says. “I was highly influenced by the work I saw in *National Geographic* and the *Time-Life* book series. I was inspired by the macro work of John Shaw and Larry West in *Audubon*, which was done in an artistic style.” This work proved to Lepp that people with a true understanding of the natural sciences were making powerful images.

Lepp left Brooks in 1972, one course short of earning his bachelor’s degree. “I guess that’s just the kind of person that I am,” says Lepp. “The last class was to make a portfolio to get a job, but I had already gone out and found a good job. So I left, but the school decided to give me the degree a year later when I started hiring Brooks graduates.”

### Becoming a professional photographer

The job that Lepp landed was assistant director in the Illustration Services department at the University of California in Davis. “I was second in command in a department of 25,” says Lepp, who held this position for three years until 1975. That’s when he decided to go out on his own as a commercial photographer.

“I still had hopes of becoming a nature photographer,” says Lepp. “But I am a realist. Commercial photography paid well, and there was very little money in nature photography.” Lepp says that he did okay as a commercial photographer, but he didn’t like it. “I was doing a lot of industrial and food photography, and that wasn’t my passion, to say the least.”

Lepp is hardly averse to photographing anything other than nature. Over the years, he has enjoyed doing all kinds of photography. For instance, he photographed for *Car and Driver* for eight years. “It was great,” he says. “Basically they would give me a car like a Lamborghini or Ferrari to drive around and photograph, and I would use techniques that I had developed for my nature photography.”

### Staying true to his natural calling

“To ensure that I would become a nature photographer, in the late 70s I began to slowly sell off my commercial equipment to buy equipment better suited to nature photography,” explains Lepp. His Hasselblad and 4x5 went, and he picked up portable flashes and longer lenses for his 35mm cameras.



Tulip field © George Lepp

Lepp continued to develop a network of friends and colleagues relating to his passion for nature photography. “I was friends with a lot of the guys in the biology department at UC Davis,” he explains. “Together—using our knowledge of the natural sciences and my photography skills—we developed unique nature photographic techniques.”

Lepp adapted a parabolic system for projecting flash to use with long lenses in nature photography, and later, with his son Tory, evolved this into a Fresnel projection system that was more efficient and could be marketed. The most striking example of Lepp-inspired photography equipment is the macro bracket system he developed and patented in the early 1980s. “My father built them in his machine shop,” says Lepp. “And we started a mail order business that was very successful. We furnished equipment to *National Geographic* and other big names. This really helped me to get to know the right people.”

In the mid-70s, Lepp met the biologist Lincoln Brower when he visited UC Davis. Lepp recalls, “He was trying to find the overwintering site of monarch butterflies in Mexico, which was just being discovered. After seeing my work, he invited me to come with him to photograph on his expedition. It paid no money, but you couldn’t have stopped me from going.”

The trip turned out to be a stunning success for Lepp. He was able to use all the techniques and equipment he had been developing to make some truly excellent photographs. “I did macro work, photographed birds eating butterflies using projected flash, and photographed butterflies emerging from their chrysalises,” Lepp says.

His images were featured in *Natural History*, as well as in a story about the expedition in *People*. “To this day, I continue to sell those pictures done in the late 70s,” he says.

Lepp made his first nature stock photography sales about the time he was leaving UC Davis, after having signed on with the Bruce Coleman agency in England. Years later he was one of the first photographers signed by the new editorial division of the prestigious Comstock agency in New York, and today Lepp is represented by Getty, Corbis, AgStockUSA and Photo Researchers. “I have made money in stock,” he says. “But it has always been a side thing because I shoot what I like and not what sells. And that isn’t the way to get rich in stock.”

### **Becoming an educator and mentor**

“I’m a teacher at heart,” says Lepp. “That is what I most want to do. That is what defines me.” Indeed, Lepp has dedicated an incredible chunk of his career to educating other photographers. “Basically, in my seminars I do a huge show and tell,” he says. “I didn’t go to kindergarten, so I guess I’ve been making up for that for 60-some years.”

“George has always been open to new possibilities,” says Rob Sheppard. “He has always loved to share ideas so that other photographers can become better photographers. He keeps no secrets.” As Lepp says: “On field trips, I find myself getting all excited about showing students new concepts. The most satisfying part of any workshop for me is seeing people grasp what I am teaching.” “George’s teaching is valuable because he is practical and down to earth, but always up on the latest trends and new technology,”



says amateur photographer John Norton. “He is patient, kind and thoughtful with his students.” Norton has taken numerous courses with Lepp since 1987. He makes it clear that, ultimately, it is Lepp’s character that truly inspires him. “He is a fine man, a skilled photographer and a good friend,” says Norton. “I have learned so much from George that he has, literally, changed my life.”

Lepp’s road to becoming a renowned educator began after leaving UC Davis, when he helped more established nature photographers teach a field class at UC Berkeley Extension. He found the experience satisfying, and sought out more teaching opportunities. “I was soon giving regular seminars through local camera stores and the university extensions at the UC Berkeley and UC Davis campuses,” he says. “I also teamed up with a sales rep from Nikon to give classes that were similar to the Nikon School of today.”

When *Outdoor Photographer* was launched in 1985, publisher Steve Werner gave Lepp the opportunity to write the monthly “Tech Tips” column, which he continues to write to this day. “I was on the masthead with photographers I highly respected, and my national recognition vastly increased,” explains Lepp. His success at *Outdoor Photographer* eventually led to Canon using him for an increasing number of lectures, which further expanded Lepp’s recognition.

### **The inner conflict of success**

At first Lepp was teaching seminars as a way to share the techniques he was developing in his own work. But over the years there has been a flip-flop. Since the early 1990s, Lepp’s seminar teaching in partnership with *Outdoor Photographer* and Canon, as well as his newsletter

and book writing, have kept him so busy that he now photographs primarily to create work to illustrate what he is teaching.

Lepp knows that this is a fantastic position to be in—allowing him tremendous freedom to make a good living photographing pretty much what he chooses. However, using his own work so extensively to demonstrate techniques has resulted in feelings of self-doubt that might surprise his students and professional colleagues: “I have worked tirelessly throughout my career to prove that I am a photographer and not just a techie,” says Lepp.

“More than anything these days, I am an instructor,” Lepp explains. “And you know the old adage that if you can’t do it, you teach. Well, I’m suspicious of people who try to teach something they don’t do. So I’ve worked hard to get beyond that to create work that stands up on its own two feet.” Lepp admits that he has never once received criticism for somehow not being a “real photographer,” but adds: “This is just how I look at it.”

### **What is a nature photographer?**

Lepp makes it clear that there is a big difference between a natural science photographer and a nature photographer. “Natural science photographers take pictures of life history,” he explains. “To do this, they must be *very* knowledgeable about their subjects.” He says that Frans Lanting and Nick Nichols are good examples of natural science photographers. “The problem is that there isn’t much money in natural science photography,” says Lepp. “The whole area of natural science photography no longer really exists as a profession unless you work for a publication like *National Geographic*.”

"What you have to do today to make money is take beauty pictures," says Lepp. "That's what a nature photographer does. I am now a nature photographer. But I like to think that I was once a natural science photographer." Lepp's work with the monarch butterflies shows that he has certainly done natural science photography.

One of Lepp's images from his monarch butterfly work illustrates the huge difference in economics between creating beauty shots and recording life history. Kodak once licensed one of his monarch butterfly images for \$24,000: a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis to illustrate the concept of "new life"—a beauty shot. Lepp has licensed the same image to a textbook for \$75.

### What is a good nature photographer?

"A good nature photographer is really a basic biologist at heart," says Lepp. "After all, you can't photograph a hummingbird if you can't find it. And you can't find it if you don't know how it lives." Lepp explains that it is also basic biology that gives the nature photographer the ability to see images in the natural world and know why they should be photographed. Then, he says, the photographer has to have the technical ability to capture those images. Lepp emphasizes that the photographer's biological knowledge is important to ensure the safety of natural subjects.

### Saving the environment with the snowball effect

"I feel strongly that my contribution to saving the environment is helping people better see the beauty around them," says Lepp. He believes that he and other nature photographers do this through their images. But Lepp believes that he makes a bigger impact through his teaching.

"The essence of my teaching is really to show people how to better appreciate what is around them," Lepp explains. "This relates to environmental activism because it helps people better appreciate the natural world first-hand. And then they show other people, and I believe there is a snowball effect—even if a lot of it is taking place subliminally."

Lepp feels that if all he does is make one person more aware of his surroundings through nature photography, then the whole thing is worth it. He recounts, "For example, I'll never forget this elderly man who was taking one of my classes near Mono Lake in California. We took a break after a few hours, and this fellow says to me: 'I've been walking through these mountains my entire life, but I've never really *seen* them before.'"

### Moving way beyond film with digital

"I've been involved with photography

for more than 50 years and it is much more exciting now than it has even been," says Lepp, who marvels at the fact that he began photographing with a 4x5 Crown Graphic and will soon be photographing with Canon's EOS-1Ds Mark III 21-megapixel camera.

"The quality of digital is so far beyond film it's not even funny," says Lepp. And with a scientist's approach to his extensive testing, Lepp should know. "The digital photographic process allows us to do stuff that we could never have dreamed of doing with film. It's getting to the point where the photographer is the only limitation. Photographers used to fight the equipment, struggle with it. Today, the only complaint about the technology should be that photographers don't have enough time to use it as fully as they'd like."

"In 2002, I was one of the first photographers to completely go to digital," says Lepp. "I started with the Canon EOS D30 towards the end of 2000, and it was obvious that it wasn't at the level of film yet. But it told me right away that here was the start of something. I could see the future was in digital, so for a while I shot film and digital side by side—to learn, and to make comparisons. About a year-and-a-half later came the Canon EOS D60, which was much better. So I went completely to digital." Because of Lepp's influence and reach as an educator, his early move to digital has had a tremendous ripple effect in getting others up to speed with the new media.

"What I respect so much about George, besides his being a great photographer, is that he is so outgoing with people and he is always on the cutting edge of technology," says Darrell Gulin, nature photographer and a past president of NANPA. "When digital was

just starting, George embraced it. And as an educator, he has been sharing this knowledge with others."

*Clockwise from top: Brown Pelicans, George and traveling van, George and Kathryn Lepp © George Lepp*



### An optimizer, not a manipulator

"I have never been big on image manipulation," says Lepp of his digital imaging postproduction. "I hate the word. I have always been big on image optimization." For Lepp, the ability to "optimize" an image has greatly improved the photographic process. "When working with chromes, scans and internegs were always substandard," he says. "In the old days, I never got a print that I



## “I love the out of doors and I am very fortunate that I can see nature through the eyes of both a naturalist and a photographer.”

thought was that good. It could never match nature. All of a sudden we have been given control. The photographer can now optimize output to recreate what he originally saw.”

In his workshops, Lepp encounters few die-hard, film holdouts. However, he does encounter photographers frustrated by the time they need to spend working on images on their computers. “What do I say to photographers who don’t want to spend time in front of a computer? I paraphrase Ansel Adams, who said that the negative is like the score, and the print is like the performance.”

### Digital as a revolutionary tool for teaching and sharing

“Digital has changed my entire approach to teaching,” says Lepp. “It’s a whole different dimension.” Lepp explains that the different dimension is being able to see that his students have truly learned the concepts he’s teaching. And, of course, his students get to see him in action as well.

“This really puts you on the spot,” says Lepp. “I’ve got to perform. Students are looking at the back of the camera, so I *have* to make a good photograph. That’s not always easy.” Lepp admits that he gets nervous sometimes, but it’s also clear that he relishes the challenge. “It’s one thing to talk about it,” he says. “It’s another thing to make it work on command when people are expecting great results.”

Lepp feels that one of the most amazing aspects of digital photography is the ability it has given people to share their images. “Before the digital revolution, most people would go out, shoot slides, maybe project them, and maybe make a crummy dupe. And that was about it,” Lepp says. “Now amateurs can make beautiful prints and share images online. They can also use inexpensive services to actually produce limited-edition books.”

### To be a success

“Success is defined in so many ways,” explains Lepp. “I am a very fortunate person that I love what I do, and I can continue to do it indefinitely. I have a high profile because I reach a million people a month with my columns. But there are a lot of people who make a lot of money through nature photography stock that are never known.”

“But it goes beyond money,” says Lepp. “There are so many times when I am blown away by the quality of the work of people whom I have never heard of. I encounter people in my classes who make

amazing photographs and who just love their work, but they are often nervous about sharing it. I can see that they are doing work as good as or better than mine. The only difference is that I am in books and magazines.”

Curiosity is the personality trait, Lepp feels, that is part of the makeup of most successful nature photographers: “You have to be willing to read and do research at different levels. You have to be persistent because people will tell you that you can’t do things. You have to be able to learn quickly. You have to be aggressive and willing to take chances. You have to be a gambler of sorts.”

All of these qualities in Lepp have no doubt played a critical role in his success. Yet again and again, he returns to the theme of his deep passion for the natural world. And it’s clear that more than anything else, this passion has been the driving force behind his striking success as a nature photographer—behind his ability to make luck happen. “I love the out of doors,” says Lepp. “And I am very fortunate that I can see nature through the eyes of both a naturalist and a photographer.”

*George Lepp currently lives in Colorado. While he still teaches occasionally at the Lepp Institute for Digital Imaging that he founded in California, the school is now safely in the hands of new owners. Lepp continues to lecture for Canon and Outdoor Photographer, but his presentations now feature the rich and colorful Rockies. Typical of Lepp, he’s immersing himself in discovery of his new environment while traveling, photographing and writing with his wife Kathryn. What does the future hold? “I want to be a contributor to this field for a long time,” Lepp says. “There is so much to know, and so much to share.” George Lepp can be reached through his website at [www.GeorgeLepp.com](http://www.GeorgeLepp.com).*

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