
Sebastopol photographer's stunning image named California's Wildlife Photo of the Year

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | March 22, 2017, 4:55PM



Joshua Asel didn't think much of the garter snake he spotted slithering in the grass at Bodega Head, a short distance from where the Sebastopol man had parked his car before striking out along the coastal bluff.

Asel, 29, had driven to the Sonoma Coast on this overcast day in May hoping to gain ground on his dream of becoming a professional wildlife photographer – not take photos of common reptiles.

But suddenly his heart did a full f-stop at the sight of a great blue heron landing near the snake.

Quickly adjusting the manual settings on his Nikon D7100 digital camera, Asel snapped several frames, suspecting all along he was capturing something special. He didn't realize how special, however, until after he returned home and uploaded the images on his computer.

"I said, 'What the hell is that?'"

In the heron's beak was the snake, and in the snake's mouth was a shrew.

The hunter had become the hunted.

Asel had perfectly captured a harrowing moment of rarely-observed predatory behavior involving three different species.

The stunning image was selected as California's Wildlife Photo of the Year for 2016 by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, which announced the award March 10.

More than 230 photos were submitted in the competition, which highlights the diversity of the state's "wildlife viewing experience," according to Fish and Wildlife officials. The annual event is sponsored by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

Asel entered his photo after he came across an ad for the contest in a copy of Outdoor California.

State Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, presented the prestigious honor to Asel on the Senate floor at the state capitol in Sacramento. McGuire and Assemblyman Marc Levine, D-San Rafael, co-authored a resolution calling Asel "a worthy model for all aspiring environmental stewards."

On top of that, Asel's photo was displayed at the state Capitol outside Gov. Jerry Brown's office.

"It's so humbling," Asel said.

The award is particularly gratifying to Asel because it further validates his decision to leave Santa Rosa Junior College in 2012 to pursue his dream of a full-time career in photography. A day job at Santa Rosa's REI store pays the bills.

Asel said his earliest exposure to nature was occasional trips to the zoo in his hometown of San Jose. In Sonoma County, where he has lived full-time for about nine years, Asel has an ideal launching pad to destinations up and down the North Coast where he can continue honing his craft.

Among his favorite places to visit are Bodega Head, Pomo Canyon Trail near Jenner, Point Reyes National Seashore and Salt Point State Park.

"I'm just really passionate about getting people to know our land and to respect and honor the animals that are here," Asel said.

Friends say Asel is relentless in his pursuit of improving his skills as a photographer. His portfolio includes condors soaring over the ocean at Big Sur, elephant seals and Tule elk at Point Reyes and Coho salmon swimming in the Russian River.

"He has a real skill for stalking wildlife to get that photo, which means sometimes camouflage and crawling around on your belly – basically, hunting wildlife with a camera instead of a gun," said Larry Broderick, founder of West County HawkWatch.

Some of Asel's work is featured on Wild Expectations Online Magazine, a site he founded to promote conservation, as well as the work of other outdoor photographers.

Asel, who is mostly self-taught, credits other photographers for mentoring him and helping him develop his skills. That includes his step-father, Kris White of Sebastopol, a former adventure sports photographer.

Asel has spent hours or even days in pursuit of a shot that meets his exacting standards. Like most photographers, he prefers to shoot in soft light, usually in the golden hours at dusk or dawn.

But as his award-winning photo demonstrates, amazing moments can manifest almost anywhere - or at any time. Being in the right place at the right time can be just as important as skill and equipment.

"You never know what you're going to get," Asel said. "Some days you try your hardest and get nothing, and some days there's a blessing."

A religious man, Asel gives credit to God for putting him in position to capture the award-winning photo. He said a couple with whom he had been speaking with just prior to the moment also witnessed the action.

"It was so unusual how the heron didn't mind a small group of people being right there," Asel said. "But when you gotta eat, you gotta eat."

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