

Scenic master George Ward gives insight into his passion for photography and how he keeps his vision fresh

By Kim Castleberry With George Ward / Photography By George Ward



CAPTURING

Having photographed the American West for more than 20 years, George Ward's images have become a familiar sight on Outdoor Photographer's pages along with many other periodicals. Bringing the beauty of North America to our fingertips, Ward uses his photographs to open people's eyes to what's in their own "backyards," with a fresh perspective that always conveys his love of nature. A self-taught photographer, he shares what he has learned over the years, including how he makes the best of his time in the field and how he stays inspired through all of the changes in imaging technology.

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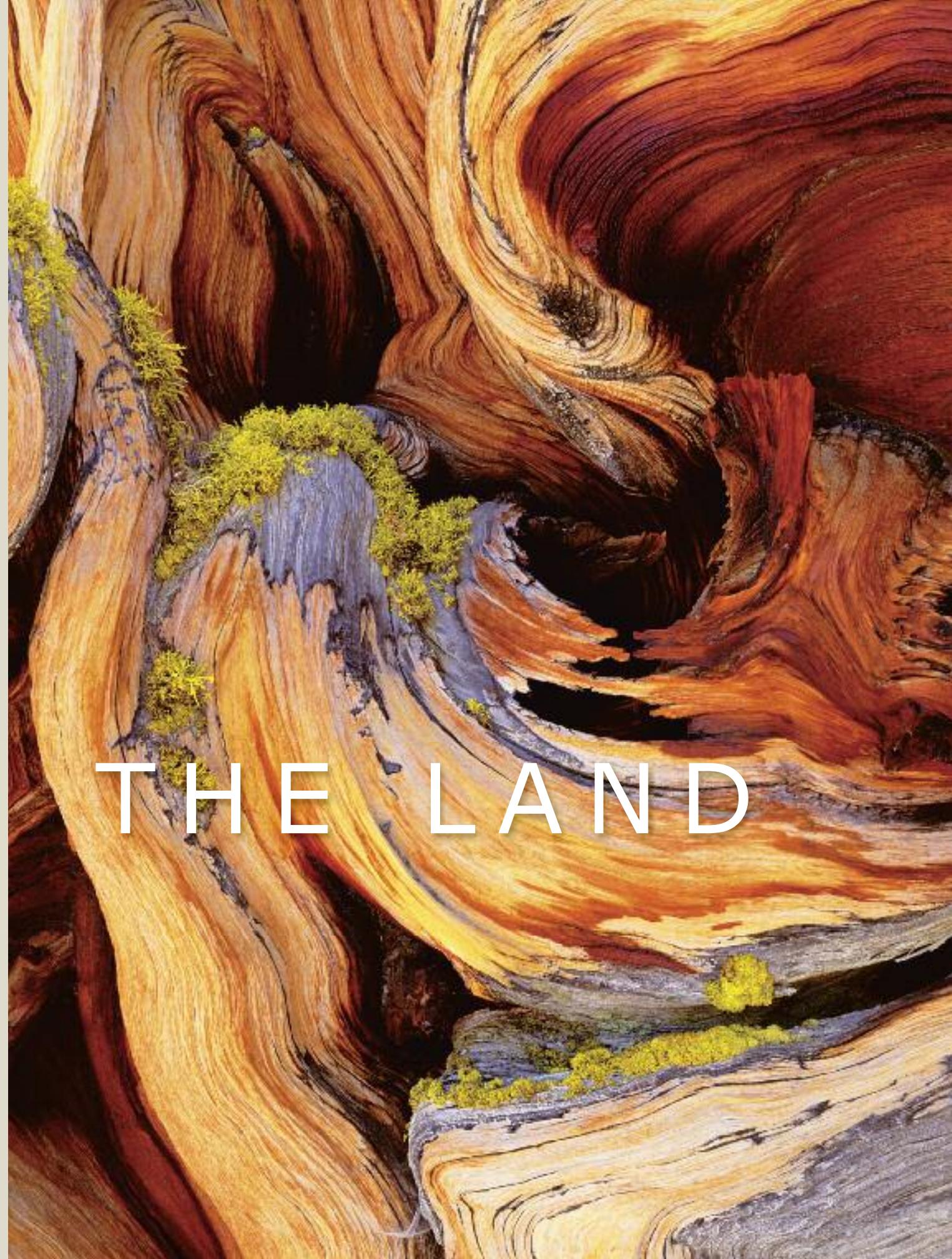
George Ward was 33 years old when he first picked up a camera in a meaningful way. Having grown up as a surfer from the age of 13, the seashore always has had a magnetic effect on him. The pivotal moment came when he awoke one morning and drove to the shore well before sunrise. Looking down, he saw millions of tiny multicolored stones in the sand and was compelled to photograph them. So he drove home, found the Nikon FE and 105mm f/2.5 Nikkor lens that a friend had given him years ago and became obsessed with nature photography.

Experiences like hearing the bark and wail of coyotes, the high-pitched cry of elk in rut and the deeply satisfying call of sandhill cranes—a wild noise that simultaneously combines a rattling sound with a soulfully hoarse voice—filled him with creative inspiration.

"I'm also moved by wonderful images wherever I find them," Ward says. "My attention is drawn to images of nature with very minimal or no alteration of what was apparently in front of the camera. With millions of images uploaded to Facebook each day, we're clearly in the post-film era, and there are many special showcases for a magical image to show up."

Ward believes compelling outdoor

THE LAND





OPENING SPREAD, LEFT AND RIGHT: Aspens above the Dolores River, San Juan National Forest, Colorado; Detail of ancient bristlecone pine, The Snake Range, Nevada

DOLOROS RIVER: Arca-Swiss 4x5, Nikkor 240mm, Gitzo tripod, 2 sec. at *f*/45; BRISTLECONE PINE: Toyo 4x5, Nikkor 135mm, Gitzo tripod, 4 sec. at *f*/45

LEFT: Tufa formations along the shore of Mono Lake at dawn, Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area, California

Nikon D700, AF-S Nikkor 24-70mm *f*/2.8G ED at 38mm, Gitzo tripod, 1/10 sec. at *f*/11

RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Rhododendron and western hemlock, Redwood National Park, California; Tidy-tips, phacelia and moon at sunrise, Carrizo Plain National Monument, California; Paintbrush and corn lily, Mokelumne Wilderness, Eldorado National Forest, California

RHODODENDRON: Toyo 4x5, Nikkor 180mm, Gitzo tripod, 8 sec. at *f*/22; TIDY-TIPS: Arca-Swiss 4x5, Nikkor 180mm, Gitzo tripod, 2 sec. at *f*/32; PAINTBRUSH: Nikon D700, AF-S Nikkor 24-70mm *f*/2.8G ED at 70mm, Gitzo tripod, 1/10 sec. at *f*/16



imagery always combines some kind of personal connection to nature and skillful technique.

“The former seems to be a form of grace,” he says, “the latter an act of will.”

Staying Fresh

To keep his passion for photographing nature fresh, Ward puts himself in situations that keep him feeling connected, such as waking up at 4 a.m. to get as far out into the wild as possible to re-live all of the sensations that inspired him in the first place. Before sunrise is his favorite

time of day as the air is usually still and the smell is sweet, he says. To Ward, the will to get away from city life, with just a camera in tow, is as essential to becoming a good photographer as working on technique or acquiring new equipment.

“I still can’t figure out what ‘shoot like a pro’ means,” he says. “But I understand the simple pleasure of being in nature at that special time of day.”

For budding nature photographers, Ward urges setting high standards based on images that are personally moving and taking the camera everywhere. Equipment

matters, but expensive additions don’t guarantee beautiful imagery, and many stunning photos have come from relatively humble camera systems. His advice also includes taking pictures of everyday objects like houseplants or furniture because it builds a familiarity with depth of field, proper exposure and other critical photographic concepts. So when the time comes and you’re standing in the middle of a mountain range or along a coast with just a fleeting moment of magical light, timing and composition are the focus, not fumbling around with camera controls.

As skills evolve to include rendering scenes in HDR, panorama stitching and refining wildlife technique, coming back to those original pictorial ideals and technical standards is what refines a photographer’s interests, helps to define a specialty and develops one’s own style, he says. What also has served his career well are all of the times his photographs were rejected by various publications.

“Those times I got excited about a particular approach or technique, only to fail miserably, were very important,” says Ward. “Rejections always guided

me toward being a better photographer. Getting published for the first time was important because it demonstrated results. I think there’s a beginning when you’re learning, which has its own special charm, and perfecting your craft. The circle completes itself and becomes a wheel, so to speak. You begin sharing your work more and more with the world. The learning always continues, but there’s a communication with society about what you’re passionate about and, through landscape photography, what we all stand to lose as a species if we aren’t more careful.”



The way images are shared, whether by selling art prints, gallery exhibits, print media or showcasing work on the web, doesn't matter. What's important is sharing and communicating, which he adds, "is just human nature."

Film To Digital

By 2007, shooting film no longer made practical sense for Ward. The entire photo-buying world, outside of some galleries, had switched to digital workflows so he had to get with the program. He felt encouraged because, after all, optical principles hadn't changed simply because light now fell on an electronic sensor instead of film emulsion. The weight of his backpack was halved. But more significantly, shooting digital allowed him to work more quickly in the field.

Ward learned fast shooting with large-format film because each time he tripped the shutter it cost him at least \$5. So he was forced by simple economics to accu-

ABOVE: Point Reyes from Chimney Rock at sunset, Point Reyes National Seashore, California

Arca-Swiss 4x5, Schneider Super Symmar XL 80mm *f*/4.5, Gitzo tripod, 1/8 sec. at *f*/16

RIGHT: Phacelia field at sunset, Carrizo Plain National Monument, California

Nikon D700, AF-S Zoom-NIKKOR 17-35mm *f*/2.8D IF-ED at 19mm, Gitzo tripod, 1/8 sec. at *f*/16



ately predict his results or go broke.

"Folks who learned to photograph this way can predict in an instant, not only exposure and depth of field, but the strength and uniqueness of subject matter and its composition," he says, "all without picking up their camera."

Notwithstanding the fact that photographers now can proof their work immediately with digital capture, Ward believes there's no substitute for experience, and a lot of time is consumed, or wasted, if you're not able to previsualize a shot.

"I personally find no thrill in making photos after the fact," explains Ward. "If I don't capture 95 percent of the magic when I trip the shutter, I usually find that postproduction doesn't appreciably help what I'm trying to convey. Because my very first edit is in my mind, I don't have to go through the incredibly time-consuming task of editing down thousands of images. Large-format film taught me to think quickly and carefully about what I wanted to express and my technical capacity to pull it off."

On The Road

Ward is a big fan of making checklists before he goes off on a photo trip because it saves him time and makes the transition from office to wilderness as smooth as possible. He also keeps a database that he updates at the end of

each trip. He records everything, from mileage, expenses, image sales and notes documenting special moments or events. The database goes back 20 years, which is very useful to him for planning.

Ward determines where he wants to go and explore based on the season. With about a dozen weather sites that he goes to for looking at everything from 10-day forecasts to sophisticated maps showing precipitation data for the previous six months (for wildflower blooms), the Internet is now his ultimate resource for researching trips.

The research also includes looking at photos. While some photographers deliberately avoid looking at photos of a place because they don't want to be influenced, he seems to take the opposite approach. He narrows down where he wants to explore by looking at as much material as he can and checking any great photography that may already exist.

"I do this partly so I don't unwittingly

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Web

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tingly create similar work to others,” says Ward. “I can deliberately avoid a certain angle, for example. It does creep me out to see images that seem to be deliberately copied from the exact same tripod holes in a relatively remote area. I’m not perfect, but this is something I really try to avoid. Obviously, that may be too idealistic for a small place of spectacular beauty like Yosemite Valley, but that’s usually the exception for me.”

No matter how much research you do online for a trip, there’s no substitute for being there, seeing the lay of the land and talking to locals about some unmarked trail that leads to something special. Ward often goes out for three or four weeks, not even photographing the first few days because he tries to do a lot of hiking and observe features under different light at various times of the day. This gives him barely enough time to really explore a wider area, narrow that down and then work on getting acquainted with the intimate moods and details of a place.

“It takes time for me to become familiar with a place,” he says. “It’s like meeting a new person that I like and getting to know them. This isn’t something to rush.”

For a place like the Valley, the volume of work that’s out there may overwhelm emerging nature photographers. Says Ward, “There will always be special moments full of magic if you persist in finding them, even in the most heavily visited sites. For myself, I find that I’m gravitating more and more to areas that are less frequented—places of boundless space, quietness and relatively pristine air.”

OP



Curtis Grindahl

George Ward is one of the leading landscape photographers in America. His images have been widely featured in numerous books, magazines and calendars, and his art prints are part of many private and corporate collections. See more of his work at www.georgeward.com.