



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DANA ALLEN

Wild Eye

A Houston attorney travels the world to photograph its amazing animals.

BY LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

Eric Grossman is standing with a dozen people on the bridge of the Stockholm expedition vessel, surrounded by the frigid air and absolute solitude of the high Arctic. As the ship floats among glittering snow-covered ice sheets, they are less than 500 miles from the North Pole. Grossman and the other passengers gaze into the vast distance, hoping to spot the world's largest land carnivores roaming the frozen seawater. The Stockholm eventually approaches a mother polar bear nursing her cub, and Grossman keeps his camera lens on the furry family. When the cub finishes and rests its head on the mother's back, looking peaceful and completely content, Grossman knows this is a moment worth remembering.

Eric Grossman, in 2013, on the ice in Svalbard, Norway, where he participated in a photography workshop on polar bears.

When Grossman isn't working as senior counsel at Chevron in Houston, you can bet he is on a plane to a faraway place. Grossman, who says he has accumulated about 1.1 million personal airline miles, has traveled to an estimated 55 countries. These destinations are where he seeks out and photographs local wildlife in impressive detail and beauty. On weekends, when many Americans are watching the big game, Grossman might head up to British Columbia, where he recently found himself wading in a salmon-filled river within 10 feet of a spirit bear. On longer trips, he's braved the cold Shiga Highlands in Japan to photograph snow monkeys, and he's slept in a rudimentary wooden blind in Finland to see wolverines at dawn.

Despite the quality of his work, Grossman doesn't sell the pictures and rarely enters competitions. He would rather spend his time sharing shots with friends and planning the next adventure.

What's your favorite place to visit and why?

My heart longs for Africa. Majestic lions and leopards silently passing within inches of you as they stalk prey; cunning packs of hyenas trying to steal a scrap or boldly taking down larger creatures; gentle giraffes shocking you with violence against other giraffes over territorial disputes; elephants swaying near your vehicle, grunting their little throat songs one moment and charging at you the next. You realize the raw power and beauty of these magnificent creatures and you're hooked—you have to go back.

When did you pick up photography and how did you advance your craft? I had an expat posting in the mid '80s and started to get a hankering for travel. Then pictures became an excuse to travel. And wildlife is pretty amazing.

I started really getting interested in taking photographs in 2008 when I bought my first "pro" camera body and some good lenses. But I still really didn't know how to use the gear. Soon I was taking one-on-one lessons from one of the finest and humblest wildlife photographers, Charles Glatzer. And in no time, here I was taking pictures in the woods of a dark subject, and all of them were coming out exactly as they should have.

What's the best advice to follow when photographing wildlife? The most important rule is to be patient—

there are no guarantees. Also, you are in the animals' space, so don't crowd them. Observe them in their natural setting, exhibiting their natural behavior. And watch for the telltale signs of stress when you are getting too close.

Have you been in a situation where you felt unsafe?

On my first trip to Africa, we headed off to see some lions on a giraffe kill. I began counting lions—but I stopped when I got to 27 because one of the big males started walking toward the open-sided jeep. Your heart rate picks up, but you trust the guide, and his calmness reassures. The lion plopped down right next to the jeep for a snooze. As long as there is food other than me and as long as I'm not between the food and the animal or between the animal and its young, I generally feel safe. But that has taken some getting used to.

Which animals do you most enjoy photographing?

The big cats and bears. It's their enormity and power, but also they are like our domestic friends—they roll on their backs, stretch, and sleep with all four paws up. That said, I'm going to photograph mountain gorillas in the summer, and I've been told that this will be a very profound experience.

Why don't you sell your photographs, and are you ever tempted to start?

I don't do it to make money. I just do it to stay sane.

Being away from the grind and searching for elusive wildlife is relaxing. And there is no pressure to sort through thousands of pictures for the ones to sell or exhibit. I think if the main focus were on earning money, that would lessen the experience—it would be more like work.

What are the most important photography tips you've learned over the years?

Sometimes, just moving over a few feet or shooting from the opposite direction changes the whole look of the picture. Shoot in the early morning or late afternoon when the light illuminates and defines your subject. To tell the story, you need to photograph the animal's behavior and its environment. And every now and then, put down the camera and enjoy. You see more when not looking through the lens. **TBJ**

For a slideshow of Grossman's photos—including his shots of the polar bears—go to texasbar.com/grossman.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ERIC GROSSMAN

Grossman captured this shot of a wild leopard in Africa.