Eliot Porter
Portraits from Nature

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Photography became my preoccupation at eleven, and it started with birds. In my twelfth year began a long series of summers on an island off the coast of Maine. In an environment of the sea and a brisk northern climate, of a ragged, rocky shore that rose abruptly out of the cold, blue Atlantic, of white gravel beaches, and of dark spruce forests, birds became an integral, inescapable part of my life.

On mornings when the tide was out, I was awakened early by the calling of gulls from the seaweed-covered rocks below my bedroom window. Often, too, I would hear the piercing whistle of a circling osprey searching for fish for his young in a huge stick nest half a mile away. This sound always got me out of bed, and I would go to the window to see the hawk's swift plunge as he dived on his prey. That arrowlike dive, with spread talons reaching ahead, and the suspense that followed before the dripping bird emerged always gave me a tingling thrill. Usually he struck true and, on strongly beating wings, rose steeply from the water with his quarry held fast. Invariably, on gaining altitude he would pause in midair to shake the water from his feathers.

I visited colonies of nesting terns and gulls on barren, neighboring islets, which excited me as a boy the way a trip back into primordial time would excite me today. There I photographed the eggs and downy chicks with my first camera, and later, with more sophisticated equipment, the adult birds at their nests and in flight. As the years went by, my interest focused on the birds of the deep spruce woods, of the birch and alder bogs, and of the brake and sweet fern thickets. I photographed all I could find.

From this first beginning with color photography based on a near horizon of living things it is, perhaps, not surprising that I developed a similar interest in other realms of nature. My horizon remained primarily a close and intimate one, but my appreciation of the intrinsic color of the world spread from birds and other forms of life to the whole natural world.

I have been attracted to nature in one capacity or another for more than fifty years, and my involvement from the beginning has been a mixture of the aesthetic and scientific. It began before the onset of the 1914 European War in a semirural community when the population of the United States was less than half its present size. Because children had to depend on their own resources, it was natural for them to find in nature the stimulation and satisfactions they

now derive from television or motorcycles. With many of us nature was a source of pleasure and a reservoir of mysteries that survived and deepened in adult life. For me this pleasure found expression in photography, whereas the mysteries of nature called for resolution in a career in science. In the end my scientific interests were dominated, but not overwhelmed, by the greater satisfaction I obtained from photography.

But even in photography, aesthetics were not my sole concern. I photographed birds for their beauty and emotional appeal, and, at the same time, to produce a precise record. The challenge was to depict birds in their natural habitats in such a way that they were represented accurately, as to plumage color and detail; convincingly, in grace of pose and surroundings; and appealingly, in a setting of informative yet pleasing simplicity.

My concern for aesthetics, however, has been a controlling consideration in all my photography. It was the cardinal principle I followed while working on my first book, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World.* The photographs in this book were made with two requirements in mind: to complement the meaning and to express my interpretation of the sentiment carried in Thoreau's words. I applied to all the subjects I photographed the criterion that if they were worth recording at all, they were worth doing in such a way that they could stand repeated viewing, even demand it, so that one would go back to the pictures again and again to find new hidden qualities missed at first glance.

My aim has always been to avoid the superficial, the dramatic without substance, the eye-catching photograph that fails to sustain its initial appeal and that becomes fatiguing on repeated or prolonged contemplation. Most photographs, of course, do not come up to these high standards. But goals consistently set higher than are possible to attain seem to inspire and guide the artist rather than to inhibit his efforts. Discouragement on the one hand and self-satisfaction on the other are the two most injurious states of mind to creative fulfillment. A third attitude assumes that it is always possible to do better, to see more clearly, to translate a clearer vision into a more meaningful and communicative piece of work. It is this attitude that has sustained and comforted me for a half century.

Eliot Porter
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