From childhood vacations, Natalie Fobes remembers her father, an amateur photographer, stopping the car often to jump out and photograph wildflowers. “I thought that was boring,” she says. Today, she thinks nothing of sitting silently in a blind for hours, hoping to photograph some wild creature—and often coming up with nothing.

A professional award-winning photographer based in Seattle, Wash., Natalie has seen her work published in National Geographic, Smithsonian, GEO, and Newsweek. She has endured 110-knot winds and swells as high as houses in the Bering Sea; been knocked unconscious when her vehicle hit a hole on a rough road; and braved freezing temperatures in Siberia to photograph native reindeer herders.

Photographing her subjects in their natural environments and engaged in their natural activities is her forte. “You shouldn’t change the behavior of animals you’re shooting,” she asserts. “I refuse to spook birds to make them fly just so I can get a shot of them in flight. I would never bait a bear to get a better shot. I rely on a lot of patience and some luck to get my shot.”

She learned self-discipline early. At age 12, she was invited to go swimming. A 6-year-old at the pool challenged her to a race—and won. That upset Natalie but motivated her to practice. Next, she joined club and school teams and began swimming competitively. By the time she graduated, she held a school swimming record. “That taught me about discipline, about setting goals, and about being rewarded for the discipline by getting better.”

Interested in art and math, she entered Iowa State University, majoring in architecture. Two photography courses in her junior year shifted her focus, however. The introductory course taught her skills. The other course opened her eyes to the profession’s possibilities.

Looking for a subject to fulfill an assignment, she saw an elderly woman raking leaves, stopped, and asked to take her picture. The woman not only agreed but invited Natalie in for lemonade; then began pouring out her life story. She had come to Iowa in a covered wagon, married a farmer, lost two children at childbirth and raised a clutch of others, and helped her family survive locusts, hailstorms, and tornadoes.

Wildlife Photographer - Natalie Stalks Her Subjects

Captures Candids of Animals In the Wild

From childhood vacations, Natalie Fobes remembers her father, an amateur photographer, stopping the car often to jump out and photograph wildflowers. “I thought that was boring,” she says. Today, she thinks nothing of sitting silently in a blind for hours, hoping to photograph some wild creature—and often coming up with nothing.

A professional award-winning photographer based in Seattle, Wash., Natalie has seen her work published in National Geographic, Smithsonian, GEO, and Newsweek. She has endured 110-knot winds and swells as high as houses in the Bering Sea; been knocked unconscious when her vehicle hit a hole on a rough road; and braved freezing temperatures in Siberia to photograph native reindeer herders.

Photographing her subjects in their natural environments and engaged in their natural activities is her forte. “You shouldn’t change the behavior of animals you’re shooting,” she asserts. “I refuse to spook birds to make them fly just so I can get a shot of them in flight. I would never bait a bear to get a better shot. I rely on a lot of patience and some luck to get my shot.”

She learned self-discipline early. At age 12, she was invited to go swimming. A 6-year-old at the pool challenged her to a race—and won. That upset Natalie but motivated her to practice. Next, she joined club and school teams and began swimming competitively. By the time she graduated, she held a school swimming record. “That taught me about discipline, about setting goals, and about being rewarded for the discipline by getting better.”

Interested in art and math, she entered Iowa State University, majoring in architecture. Two photography courses in her junior year shifted her focus, however. The introductory course taught her skills. The other course opened her eyes to the profession’s possibilities.

Looking for a subject to fulfill an assignment, she saw an elderly woman raking leaves, stopped, and asked to take her picture. The woman not only agreed but invited Natalie in for lemonade; then began pouring out her life story. She had come to Iowa in a covered wagon, married a farmer, lost two children at childbirth and raised a clutch of others, and helped her family survive locusts, hailstorms, and tornadoes.

Wildlife Photographer - Natalie Stalks Her Subjects

Captures Candids of Animals In the Wild

From childhood vacations, Natalie Fobes remembers her father, an amateur photographer, stopping the car often to jump out and photograph wildflowers. “I thought that was boring,” she says. Today, she thinks nothing of sitting silently in a blind for hours, hoping to photograph some wild creature—and often coming up with nothing.

A professional award-winning photographer based in Seattle, Wash., Natalie has seen her work published in National Geographic, Smithsonian, GEO, and Newsweek. She has endured 110-knot winds and swells as high as houses in the Bering Sea; been knocked unconscious when her vehicle hit a hole on a rough road; and braved freezing temperatures in Siberia to photograph native reindeer herders.

Photographing her subjects in their natural environments and engaged in their natural activities is her forte. “You shouldn’t change the behavior of animals you’re shooting,” she asserts. “I refuse to spook birds to make them fly just so I can get a shot of them in flight. I would never bait a bear to get a better shot. I rely on a lot of patience and some luck to get my shot.”

She learned self-discipline early. At age 12, she was invited to go swimming. A 6-year-old at the pool challenged her to a race—and won. That upset Natalie but motivated her to practice. Next, she joined club and school teams and began swimming competitively. By the time she graduated, she held a school swimming record. “That taught me about discipline, about setting goals, and about being rewarded for the discipline by getting better.”

Interested in art and math, she entered Iowa State University, majoring in architecture. Two photography courses in her junior year shifted her focus, however. The introductory course taught her skills. The other course opened her eyes to the profession’s possibilities.

Looking for a subject to fulfill an assignment, she saw an elderly woman raking leaves, stopped, and asked to take her picture. The woman not only agreed but invited Natalie in for lemonade; then began pouring out her life story. She had come to Iowa in a covered wagon, married a farmer, lost two children at childbirth and raised a clutch of others, and helped her family survive locusts, hailstorms, and tornadoes.
“The thing that struck me most was that she opened up to me simply because I was a photographer. I was hooked. How cool to be able to walk into someone’s life, see how they live, what they experience, and come away with pictures that tell the story!”

She left school, returning home to live with her parents. She worked two part-time jobs while rethinking her future. She also began hanging out with news photographers at the Des Moines Register.

In January 1977, Natalie entered Ohio University’s photojournalism program. Soon, she approached the photo editor at the Cincinnati Enquirer with her portfolio. He offered her a summer internship. After she earned her bachelor’s degree, the Enquirer hired her as a permanent staff photographer. Within a year, she was named Ohio photographer of the year. But, when a media chain took over the daily, she quit and took a position with the Seattle Times. Here, she chased fewer deadlines and produced more in-depth features.

When her father came to visit her, she took him to a river to show him a Pacific Northwest phenomenon: salmon returning upriver to spawn and die. Quietly, they watched the fish determinedly leaping, falling, and leaping again as they swam against the current. “Awe. Sadness. I felt a jumble of emotions. The salmon’s life cycle is an amazing mystery. It returns to its natal waters, spawns once, and dies. Even in death, it continues to give back. As it decays, it gives the nutrients into the water that the progeny need to get strong.” Overwhelmed, Natalie glanced at her father and saw tears in his eyes, too.

Grant Spawns Study

Back at work, she told her editors she wanted to work on stories about salmon and fishing. They agreed.

Intent on the task, she began studying the salmon’s life cycle. She learned to identify various species. She interviewed fisheries biologists. Needing extra income to fund her work, she sent a query letter to National Geographic. Undeterred by its rejection letter, she applied for a grant, got $25,000, and took a 14-month leave from the Times to work full time on the salmon story.

Traveling through Washington, Alaska, and Japan, Natalie caught on film the ancient, intri-
cated relationship between salmon, humans, and the environment. In November 1987, the Seattle Times ran a special insert, “Saga of Salmon.” It won high praise from many sources and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. She sent a copy to National Geographic, and it offered her a six-weeks contract to do a similar story. When she began traveling to develop the National Geographic assignment, the Times offered her the choice: Work there full-time or not at all.

“There was no way I was going to stop shooting a National Geographic story,” she recalls. In fact, she went on to cover both commercial fishing in the Bering Sea and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska for National Geographic.

**Slippery Subject**

To get the oil-spill story, Natalie chartered a plane to obtain aerial shots. She hung out with bureaucrats, corporate spokespersons, cleanup workers, Alaska natives, and other journalists. She hitched rides on commercial fishing boats and, in her bunk at night, heard the screams of oil-coated sea otters and birds.

When she left the Times, she was confident “that if I had enough good story ideas, I could get hired at any magazine. But I was very naive,” she admits. “Later, I realized that National Geographic is the only magazine that accepts story proposals from photographers.”

Even that source dried up in 1991, when the magazine’s new editor cleaned house and dismissed former contributors, including Natalie. “Just like that, I had to become a businesswoman,” she says. To learn how to promote herself and her work, she read books about negotiating and marketing. She joined the American Society of Media Photographers. She went to New York City to wrangle assignments from editors at Time-Life Publications, New York Times Magazine, Newsweek, and U.S. News & World Report.

She has since published three books, and has contributed to many others. She has built an enormous library of photographs that she advertises in stock-photo books, which editors scan to find specific illustrations. Her part-time assistant catalogs and cross-references these so she can easily find what clients want. A few corporate accounts pay well for her work to illustrate their marketing and promotional pieces. Hundreds of lesser accounts also use her photos. Some of her work is part of an exhibit that tours museums. She also has made and sells postcards, T-shirts, and note cards with her photos on them.

Yesterday, Natalie awoke at 5 a.m., eager to go to the Skagit River. The Skagit River Watershed Council had contracted her to photograph bald eagles and salmon there. Since eagles feed on salmon in the morning, she wanted to arrive early. Her four-wheel-drive vehicle was already packed with three cameras, one in a waterproof case for underwater shots; lenses, including a telephoto lens for distance photography; 20 rolls of film; a tripod; and a drysuit to keep her warm in the river’s frigid water. Near the Skagit, she met Bob, a local environmental advocate, who would guide and assist her.
doubted they would be very good. She reloaded
again and returned to the stream, hoping to cap-
ture the elaborate male and female spawning ritu-
al. “They actually do a flirtation dance,” she ex-
plains. “The male will go over to the female and
rub against her. She’ll quiver. It’s fascinating.”

She left the water at 1:15. After removing her
drysuit, she and the guide drove to a farmhouse
to ask the landowner’s permission to scout out a
spot on which to build a blind for photographing
eagles that feed on the salmon.

Natalie then drove Bob to his car and stopped
to eat her brownbag lunch. Afterward, she slow-
ly drove up and down the road looking for ea-
gles, which are less afraid of humans in cars than
of humans on foot. She photographed several.

For the remainder of the day, she photographed
the Skagit River, the salmon, the orange and ma-
genta afterglow on snowy Cascade Mountain
peaks after sunset, and, finally, the moonrise
flooding the scene with silver light. Checking
into a cabin she had reserved, she ate dinner and
got to bed early to get up by 5:30 a.m. to con-
tinue her hunt for eagles.

To relax, Natalie reads, gardens, and works on
remodeling a house with her husband Scott
Sunde. Her pursuit of story-telling shots will
continue, she says. “I can’t imagine doing any-
thing else.”

DATA FILE

Wildlife Photographer

FOR MORE INFORMATION
The subject of this biography is not available to answer
personal inquiries. For more information, please write
to the following organizations or go to their Web site.
Addresses are current as of publication date.

American Society of Media Photographers
Web Site: http://www.asmp.org

National Press Photographers Association
Web Site: http://www.sunsite.unc.edu/nppa

North American Nature Photography Association
Web Site: http://www.nanpa.org

Professional Photographers of America
Web Site: http://www.ppa-world.org

To find information about similar careers, see separate
Vocational Biographies booklet index and cluster listing,
an encyclopedia, or books on careers found in
your library, career center, or counseling or placement
office. Check the vertical file, card catalog, microfiche,
or computer listing. Look up the following words:
Advertising, Art, Environment, Journalism, Photograph-
er, Photojournalist, Wildlife. Also see the Business and
Office, Communications and Media, Fine Arts and Hu-
manities, and Marketing and Distribution Careers clus-
ters in the Vocational Biographies Career Library Index.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW
Visit a newspaper or magazine office and talk to photogra-
phers there about what they do. Get an internship or part-
time job as a photography assistant. Serve as a staff pho-
tographer on your school newspaper and yearbook.
Become a photography stringer for a local newspaper.
Learn how to use both traditional and digital camera
equipment. Put together a portfolio showcasing the best of
your work. Take courses in English, art, photography,
composition, business practices, bookkeeping, marketing,
and physics.

LIFESTYLE IMPLICATIONS
Free-lance photographers may have flexible schedules
but may also spend much time tracking down assign-
ments and marketing their work. They also may spend
days away from home and work in remote, potentially
dangerous surroundings, putting a strain on families.

©2000, Vocational Biographies Inc., Sauk Centre, MN 56378. 800-255-0752. All rights reserved.