

Wildlife Photographer ◀

BRIEFLY: They can't just ask a deer to rub its antlers over bark. So they watch for hours, days, even weeks, waiting until it does so instinctively. They can't lure trout from streams or ducks from marshes, so they go into the water with them—and wait. *They* are wildlife photographers, like Natalie Fobes. They are as patient, cunning, and daring as their subjects.

Natalie Stalks Her Subjects

Captures Candid Moments 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.



► Natalie advertises over 60,000 photographs, cataloged and cross-referenced, in stock-photo books.

FOR THE RECORD



Natalie Fobes

Owner
Natalie Fobes Photography
Seattle, Wash.

EDUCATION

- ▶ Roosevelt High School, Des Moines, Iowa. Graduated 1973. Favorite subjects—art, history, math, reading, English. Member of swim and golf teams; participated in drama, cheerleading, ballet; served as secretary on school's student council; sang in church chorus.
- ▶ Iowa State University, Ames. Studied architecture 1973-1976.
- ▶ Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Bachelor's degree in journalism 1978. *"One of my chief criticisms of school is that they don't teach you the business aspects of photography. I learned the hard way that you can't build a business on one client. I realized I had to show my portfolio to try to get a balanced base of clients."*

WORK HISTORY

- ▶ Worked as a waitress, a deli manager, and a lifeguard during college to earn money for tuition, room, board, books, and cameras.
- ▶ Photo intern, then permanent staff photographer, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1977-1981. *"On my internship, I was able to do portraits, environmental shots, sports, spot news, everything. They threw me in with the big guys and expected me to perform."*
- ▶ Photographer, weekend photo editor, *Seattle Times*, Seattle, Wash., 1981-1987.
- ▶ Visiting professor, Ohio University, Athens, 1995. Taught graduate students in photography for one school quarter.

JOB BENEFITS

- ▶ None. Self-employed. *"I am free to be my own boss."*

CLOSE-UP

- ▶ *"The number one goal for a photo student should be to get published in as many different places as possible, to build up a portfolio, and to learn how to photograph for a publication. There's a lot of difference in doing fine arts photography and shooting with limited time and still making pictures that have a point to them. [Newspapers] give you a great opportunity to hone your skills, to get really fast at what you do."*
- ▶ *"Some days, I can go out and not get any good shots, even though I work hard struggling to get some. But other days I get a lot of unexpected photos."*
- ▶ *"Being knowledgeable about your subject makes it easier for you to get a picture that nobody else could get."*

"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-

cate 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 had 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.



► "When I give workshops on doing photo stories, I tell people you've got to get down and put your arms around your subject, or you won't know where to even begin," Natalie says.

At 10, they began hiking inland looking for streams. They checked out a couple. Neither had many salmon, but one had better light, so Natalie selected it. She donned her diving suit; then added hood, mask, snorkel, gloves, and booties. Entering the water downstream so the fish would be less likely to detect her scent and movement, she crawled on her stomach toward the salmon, holding her bulky, 20-pound camera in front of her.

The salmon were unusually cooperative, and, for 20 minutes, Natalie was able to get great close-ups of 3-foot chum and 2-foot coho salmon. But she then had to leave the water to change film, and, when she returned, the fish were wary and skittish. She took more photos but

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doubted they would be very good. She reloaded again and returned to the stream, hoping to capture the elaborate male and female spawning ritual. "They actually do a flirtation dance," she explains. "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 slowly 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 magenta 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 went to bed early to get up by 5:30 a.m. to continue 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 anything else."

DATA FILE

Wildlife Photographer

O*NET:34023A D.O.T.:143.062-034 CF S.O.C.:3261 HC:AEC

WORK DESCRIPTION

Photographs wildlife in their natural habitat—accepts assignment from editor or comes up with photo-story idea and pitches it to editors; researches background information; travels to site; takes photographs; develops negatives; prints film; submits negatives and pictures to assignment editor. May also relicense photos to editors and exhibit pictures in museum shows. May sell related retail products. May write grant applications and seek other sources of funds. May teach photographic workshops.

WORKING CONDITIONS

In studio. On location. May travel to remote areas for long periods of time. May work in uncomfortable and/or dangerous surroundings, risking injury or illness.

PLACES OF EMPLOYMENT

Self-employment; newspapers; magazines; publishing companies; advertising agencies; government agencies.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Good eyesight; true-color vision; stamina; coordination; efficiency; good physical condition; manual dexterity; artistic ability; independence; flexibility; perseverance; patience; concentration; self-discipline; initiative; curiosity; originality; willingness to work outdoors in all weather and ignore unpleasant conditions; business sense.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Photography experience and extensive portfolio minimum. Completion of photography courses highly advised. Bachelor's degree in photojournalism recommended.

JOB OUTLOOK

Steady, but keen competition exists for assignments and positions.

SALARY RANGE

\$15,000 to \$50,000 or more per year, depending on experience, reputation, employer, and location.

RELATED OCCUPATIONS

Aerial Photographer
Advertising Photographer
Photojournalist

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, Photographer, Photojournalist, Wildlife. Also see the Business and Office, Communications and Media, Fine Arts and Humanities, and Marketing and Distribution Careers clusters in the Vocational Biographies Career Library Index.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

Visit a newspaper or magazine office and talk to photographers there about what they do. Get an internship or part-time job as a photography assistant. Serve as a staff photographer 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 assignments and marketing their work. They also may spend days away from home and work in remote, potentially dangerous surroundings, putting a strain on families.

Persons are portrayed herein without regard to race, sex, or religious background. Careers discussed are to be considered acceptable for either sex. Information is current as of publication date.