

INTRODUCTION

When you mention my name to most people, they associate me with iconic images like this. Big, sexy, exotic species taken at the ends of the planet by a carefree photographer with a dream lifestyle. Yeah, I guess that is certainly how it looks from the outside, to all but the few who really know the real me. Because inside I am very, very, different indeed, and that's the crux of this book. It's a conversation with my inner-self that many of you will relate to. Yeah, it's a very different photography book, it's about the life behind the images, the mindfulness of being a wildlife photographer and finding a happy place with nature. If I can help one person find the same solace and peace with nature using this book then the journey is complete for me.

Standing on the deck of my beloved icebreaker M/S Stockholm in Svalbard last August, it was certainly an iconic moment, and for so many reasons such a happy day in my life. I love encounters like this with wildlife, where animals come to us on their terms, because they want the connection and the encounter. There was no aggression here at all on the part of the bear, she was a great mother and spent an hour inspecting us, sniffing us and generally checking us out, before deciding to bring her yearling cub for a look. I live for these encounters, I'm buzzing and I simply love it. The high is amazing for me, it's like a drug without all the side effects. Actually that's not true, it does have side effects, just the same as any stage performer finds when they walk off that stage and life becomes normal again. One minute all is amazing, the next it's normal, and for me, dealing with that normal has been a tough journey. But let me try to explain the high.

I can still feel the cold wind on my face and I can hear the silence

so loudly. The sun was taking forever to set as it does at this time of the year in the high Arctic, and the female polar bear was coming closer and closer. Our ship was totally silent, parked against the ice and everything switched off to avoid any chance of scaring the bears. It's the last thing you wanna do on so many levels, it's their home and they belong, we are just guests and have to behave accordingly.

Slowly, with growing confidence, she approached us, the cub following some distance behind as we must have looked big and scary. Her behaviour showed that she wanted to come close to us, she wanted the encounter, and it's clear she wanted it for the cub as there was no other explanation. Of course we can't know this, but to us it seemed like she had maybe not done this before with the cub, certainly we were in an area where no ships ever came. That's the point of what we do of course; wilderness exploration. And as wilderness explorers it's our responsibility to ensure that all encounters like this are positive for both sides, not just the humans who were smiling from ear to ear. In total the encounter lasted for over two hours and not once did we do anything to encourage it, it was always on her terms. I remember her sitting there just below us, watching us watching her, all was silent apart from the occasional expression of pure love from the human audience. Wildlife encounters like this are what I live for, it's a win win on all sides and it makes me feel so damn good inside. You can see why it's such a high.

So what's the problem then you might ask? Why did you do this book, what's the point? To start to explain it I need to show you one of my most recent pictures...





This was taken slightly less than a year later than the polar bear encounter. Same name, different person.

For those that don't know, and that was me too a few months ago, this is a beautiful demoiselle damselfly. A stunning flash of colour, showing just how beautiful nature can be, they brighten up many rivers and streams in the British countryside in the early summer. Taken not in the wilderness of the Arctic but by sitting in a tiny stream on a hot summer's afternoon in leaky waders that always gave me a wet backside within minutes.

So what's different about this image from the polar bear? That's easy. It's me that's different.

You see when I took that polar bear, I couldn't tell you what a beautiful demoiselle was, or a small copper butterfly. I never saw them around me in the summer, I just focussed on the more iconic species. I had totally lost all connection with the UK nature that surrounded me. It had been a gradual process and one that had almost crept up on me without me knowing.

When I took the polar bear image I was free to travel and do what I wanted to. I chose to be there.

When I took this image I was almost forced to be there, as we were in Covid lockdown. All freedoms removed; no chance of any travel, polar bears, or tigers, and all my other iconic exotic species were just a dream. In fact they still are in some respects. And you know what, being forced to see the nature around me was the best thing that happened to me in my whole life, because it forced me to re-connect with nature in a way that had been completely missing for years. It was my coping mechanism when my business, my house, and my normal life had all been pulled from under me by two completely unforeseen events.

I can tell you, hand on heart, that my encounters with these damselflies were so much more memorable than any encounter with a polar bear could be. An amazing statement that I would never have thought would have come from my mouth a year ago. The reason - simply because they helped me when I needed them the most and they were right there in front of me, everyday; a colourful counselling service provided free by Mother Nature. Even in leaky waders.

I have felt such a calling to write this book. I know that the events of 2020 have caused many many people to have the same issues as me. I have such extremes of my life, that sometimes everyday life at home seems so tough to deal with. I have my girls and they are the centre of

my life, but in order to be what they need, I need to be happy in myself. I know I have issues, I need certainty and structure in my life, I can get easily down. I don't mind admitting these to you because these days so many of us suffer from mental health issues that the conversation has much less of a stigma attached. Since I first started talking about these fears, loathing and self doubt on my Facebook I have been astounded at the outpouring of support from people, taking my positive words and feelings to help them in their everyday lives. It's uplifting for me knowing that being honest and being myself helps others.

So what's this book about? It's a journey of inspiration, how I used photography to connect with my local nature and help me through the most challenging period of my life. It's not written for any one audience, but inclusive for all. For photographers there's lots of nuggets and suggestions, getting you to ask questions of yourself and your photography that perhaps you haven't before; a book of the process of using photography to connect with nature. For those of you struggling with all these changes in our lives I've written a lot of coping mechanisms and mantras that I have used to really emerge from this period with a positive attitude. It's a journey of a troubled wildlife photographer through one of the most challenging periods on every single level that we will ever encounter. It shows how I didn't give up when all seemed at its darkest, how I always chose to walk away from the beckoning darkness and towards the light.

My hope is that if you give this book the time and space it deserves, that on those days when you doubt yourself and your photography, it will pick you up, dust you down and give you the power to move forward. Don't think about it as a book about Covid or lockdown, they were just the catalysts for my change. Instead think of this book as a life lesson, showing how you can change yourself for the better, and for all around you, using the wonderful healing power of nature and photography. It's reverse genetics, see the person that you want to be and do everything you can to be that person. I did, and I'm going to take you now on a journey that shows you how.