

The Wild Life

Whether in a faraway jungle or his Farmington backyard, Sean Crane is always on the hunt for the next amazing animal photo.

A camera trap captures an American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) at night as it walks past Sean Crane's camera in Farmington.



Hunting down the shot: (top) A polar bear patrols the shoreline at sunrise at Seal River, Hudson Bay, Manitoba, Canada. "This was one of those glorious mornings when you just knew it was going to be spectacular when the sun cleared the clouds," Crane says. "I was happy just to get out and take a few landscape shots as there were no bears in sight. As soon as I mounted my wide angle, however, and stepped out into the frigid air, I saw the polar bear wander into frame. I quickly switched to my 70-200 (telephoto zoom lens) before the sun got too high in the sky."

(above) Crane is also often on patrol day and night in an effort to capture dramatic photos of animals.

Think of Sean Crane as a mild-mannered Indiana Jones with a camera instead of a bullwhip. He travels the world seeking treasure—visual not archaeological—and his holy grail isn't the cup of Christ but animal species he hasn't yet photographed.

National Geographic has published his work, he's won awards from The Smithsonian and the Audubon Society, and his images have appeared as part of the backdrop for the Broadway play *Impressionism*, starring Jeremy Irons and Joan Allen.

A chief creative officer by day for the Avon advertising agency Mintz + Hoke, Crane has seen his exotic adventures grounded by the pandemic, but he refocused his lens closer to home and is getting noticed for photographing wildlife on his five-acre Farmington property. We tracked down the photographer to learn about the man behind the lens.—

DOUGLAS P. CLEMENT

You've photographed wildlife on every continent, and in all U.S. states, but *National Wildlife* magazine recently featured images of animals in your backyard?

There aren't a lot of upsides to a global lockdown. Especially for someone who specializes in images from the far corners of the globe. But I've always wanted to get into camera trapping, and without the ability to travel, it's what allowed me to stay inspired while staying put. Unlike 90 percent of my wildlife photography, which is very reactive—I see an animal and sometimes only have a few seconds to get the shot—camera trapping is the complete opposite. I can spend hours setting up a shot that I might not actually capture for several days, or even months. The ultimate goal is the same—a compelling image—but I have more control over the result when camera trapping. That is, assuming I can predict where an animal might appear, which takes a whole other set of skills.

Starting out, I knew, or at least hoped, I'd eventually get a few bears. They regularly pass through my yard and I had been photographing them the old-fashioned way. It's the unexpected visitors that really make it fun. I was checking the traps one night when, all of a sudden, I saw a flying squirrel glide silently from one tree to another. I knew they existed in Connecticut but had never seen one.

It's certainly been fun getting to know the wildlife I share my yard with, but that said, I'm still yearning for the next exotic adventure elsewhere in the world.

Your favorite destinations?

I've never been one to read the same book or see the same movie multiple times. Variety is key for me and there's always something new to read and watch. I'm the same way with travel. Except Madagascar. It's the one place I've been that I can't wait to get back to. It doesn't feel like anywhere else. The animals are unique, the flora is unique, even the rocks look different from anywhere else on Earth. Unfortunately, almost 90 percent of the original forests are gone, but what remains is captivating, to say the least. Here's hoping I make it back before even more is lost.

In addition to loving the exotic, and as much as I appreciate a knowledgeable wildlife guide, there's nothing better than finding locations where I can be alone in nature. The Falkland Islands were one such place. Just me, a camera and five different species of penguin to pass the time.

And your wife doesn't travel with you?

She's been on a few of my wildlife excursions. Kenya, the Galapagos Islands, the more civilized locations. She does share my love of animals. But she also loves nice hotels. And fine dining. And other people to talk to. When I go on these trips, it's all about the wildlife. I get obsessed with it, and I'll be out in the wild from before sunup until after sundown, and quite often deep into the night searching for nocturnal animals. If I miss meals, so be it. We've tried hybrid trips where we mix relaxation and culture with wildlife, but in most cases it just doesn't work. We're now on a bit of a bartering system—one trip for her, one for lemurs.

Do you have a holy-grail species?

I do. Until I capture that species and then it becomes the next species I haven't captured yet. And there are a lot of those. I was in Thailand in 2016 and really wanted to see a clouded leopard. I knew it would be almost impossible to see one, as they are extremely secretive like most tropical cats. But in the pursuit itself I was confident I'd see a lot of other things. The clouded leopard's cousin, the snow leopard, is at the top of a lot of people's list, but I've yet to go after one because there aren't a lot of other species to see along the way in the Himalayas. Don't get me wrong, I'd absolutely love to see one and will make the trip eventually, but I hate the possibility of returning home empty-handed.

I went to Tasmania a few years back—another of my favorite locations—and I hired a locally famous guide for a few days. He confirmed, with his own eyes no less, rumors of Tasmanian tiger sightings—a species that was



Home and away: Crane travels all over the globe, including to Tangkoko National Park in Sulawesi, Indonesia, where he photographed a spectral tarsier (*Tarsius tarsier*), lit only by moonlight. Due to the pandemic he's lately shifted his lens to the wilds of his Farmington property, where creatures like raccoon, possum and bobcat regularly roam.





(left) A wide-angle shot of a diademed sifaka lemur (*Propithecus diadema*) hanging from a tree on Lemurs Island in Perinet, Madagascar.

(above) A male red lechwe antelope (*Kobus leche*) dashes through the flooded savanna grasslands of the Okavango Delta in Botswana.

declared extinct in 1936 and hasn't been photographed since. That's all I needed to hear. The hunt was on, along with my delusions of a *National Geographic* cover. It didn't happen, of course, but I came home with memory cards full of wombats, quolls, pademelons [both marsupials] and many more of Tasmania's amazing locals.

What are your favorite photos?

In addition to unusual behavior and action, I'm always looking to capture wildlife in its environment. Full-frame images of rare species are great, but there's nothing like seeing an animal framed by spectacular scenery. I think of it as capturing a landscape image that an animal just so happens to be a part of. A polar bear, small in frame, backlit by mist rising from the Hudson Bay. A bighorn ram standing on an eroded butte in the Badlands beneath a dramatic sky. An orangutan swinging through a wide-angle view of the Bornean jungle.

In addition to *National Geographic*, you've been published in *Popular Photography*, *Natural History Magazine* and other titles. Have any stood out for you?

National Geographic did a story on coyotes where they used my photo as the lead. When my stock agent, Minden Pictures, licenses one of my images, I'm never quite sure where it'll end up. It's always nice to randomly stumble upon a placement, especially for a publication like *NatGeo*.

On another occasion, my sister gave me a beautiful hardcover coffee table book for Christmas, neither one of us realizing that several of my images were featured inside.

In the play *Impressionism*, in which Jeremy Irons played an international photojournalist, the production team used a slideshow of wildlife images projected on a screen as a backdrop to the drama. A couple of them were mine. Around the same time, just down the street in Times Square, several dozen of my photos graced the illuminated signage of the skyline for an advertising campaign.

What came first in terms of your interests: animals or photography?

From as far back as I can remember, the natural world, and wildlife in particular, has been a big part of my life. Meanwhile, my father was

city editor of the *Bristol Press* when I was a kid and he would borrow cameras from time to time and let me try them out. My sisters and I were athletes, so it began with photographing sports. As an adult, I went to Africa for the first time in 1999 and finally put the two together in a more meaningful way. It was that trip to Tanzania that started my lifelong quest to go everywhere and see every living creature that I possibly can.

How do you swing it, given your day job in advertising? And how do the two pieces fit together?

Generous PTO helps, of course. Mintz + Hoke supports my passion and allows me the occasional indulgence of time to do my thing. That said, what I do with my camera out in the wild and what I do with my pen at the office really do benefit and complement each other. They're both creative pursuits and spending time doing one keeps things fresh when it's time to get back to the other. And I do use my photography a lot for clients. Access Health is one current example in Connecticut, and when I was in New York, a former client was the National Park Service, which is still using some of my work.

I gather people assume you come from a visual background, given your history as a creative director and now your role as chief creative officer at Mintz + Hoke, but that's not the case?

A creative director typically comes from either an art background or a writing background. I've been running a photo-of-the-day blog for over 15 years now and many of my current and former agency co-workers and clients are on my mailing list, so they naturally assume I was an art director. But I was actually a writer. Understanding things like composition, color balance and lighting has certainly made me a better creative director and allowed me to more effectively communicate and articulate my thoughts across both disciplines.

Before I started with Mintz + Hoke, my ad career included stints in Boston, Denver, Detroit and two stops in New York. I don't know how I would have handled being locked down in any one of those cities. But I do have one regret about moving from New York to the Farmington Valley—not as many direct flights back out of the country. ■

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