

Tom Sears Photography

The Man Behind the Camera

By Patrice La Vigne



In the spring of 2007, in northern New Hampshire, a black bear sow gave birth to five healthy young. After spending nearly four hours a day, seven days a week, for six weeks, Tom Sears had that once in a lifetime opportunity and photographed the entire new family together in the shadows.

TOM SEARS IS A NATURE AND wildlife photographer living in northern New Hampshire who stumbled upon notoriety a few years ago when he took several photos of a black bear and her five healthy cubs. Many people (including myself) who had seen the photos wondered,

“Who is this man and how did he come across this extraordinary occurrence?”

The first time I saw Tom’s famous bear photo series, my husband and I stood there staring for a number of minutes, mesmerized and fascinated by the photos and the secondhand

story we were hearing of how Tom captured the moments. Now I have met the man himself and if there’s one thing I learned, Tom is a man of true dedication and patience when it comes to photography.

Tom's Story of the Bears

A black bear litter size typically ranges from one to four offspring, with the average being two or three young. In 2007, a black bear living in northern New Hampshire gave birth to five healthy cubs. Tom set a goal of photographing all five cubs with their mama—no matter what the time commitment might turn out to be.

Following the trail the bear family took regularly, Tom spent nearly four hours each day for six weeks to try to photograph them together. He succeeded one evening in 2007 and produced some of the well-known shots showing the bears posing for a family portrait, as it seems.

The following year in April, Tom saw the full family again. He dreamed nightly of taking another family portrait and on April 25, 2008, he achieved more once-in-a-lifetime photographs.

The news of the improbable bear family portraits spread worldwide. Tom received thousands of emails asking all sorts of questions about the bears. The bear family thrived and eventually went their separate ways, but Tom made a point to stay away because he didn't want them to become habituated to people.

"The first rule of wildlife photography is to protect the animals that you are photographing," Tom said. "You don't want to compromise the animals."



Tom Sears ... the man behind the camera.

Meeting the Man Behind the Curtain, Errr, Camera

As a New England native who grew up visiting New Hampshire during the summers, Tom attended the University of New Hampshire and eventually made northern New Hampshire his permanent home. And Tom has always loved being outdoors. During his childhood, he rode horses nearly

every day and also evolved into an avid skier and a fairly serious hiker and climber.

"For the past 20 years, I have used many of these skills to get where the critters are," Tom said.

Tom first discovered an affinity for photography while he was stationed in Alaska for his service in the Army during



The following spring, before the snow disappeared, all six bears came out of their den and wandered the same familiar territory they trekked in the spring of 2007. Tom saw them before mid-April and dreamed nightly of taking another family portrait; an improbable second once in a lifetime photograph. On April 25, 2008 he achieved his dream.

The Amazing Photography of Tom Sears



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the 1950s. In Alaska, Tom constantly encountered picture-perfect landscapes and wildlife.

One day while driving on a dirt road north of Fairbanks, he and his fellow army officers witnessed about 100,000 caribou members of the Porcupine herd migrating through the valley, creating a “river of animals.” One of the officers had a camera to capture the moment and right then and there, Tom realized he had to get himself a camera as well.

“I wanted to document some of the things I witnessed before they didn’t exist anymore,” Tom explained.

Tom moved on from the Army and Alaska and entered the college textbook publishing industry. His job afforded him the opportunity to travel nationwide to more than 800 college campuses. He took full advantage of being in these places.

“I worked in New York City one time, and I hated every minute of it!” Tom said.

Weekends off meant he could explore the outdoors. Tom often traveled north on his photography adventures, and I’m not just talking north like Alaska. I’m talking northern places where the polar bears and icebergs are, like Baffin Island, an island located in eastern Canada across from Greenland, and Newfoundland. You better believe Tom has photographed a polar bear, one time from just 50 feet away.

One thing was true about his travels—he never leaves home without his camera. And in the 1980s, Tom turned his photography hobby into a business.

**Photography Means
Dedication and Patience**

Tom has many experiences that match the time commitment he made to take photos of the bear family in New Hampshire.

For example, in the late 1990s, when he was living in Florida, he felt compelled to return to Alaska and witness the migration of caribou that he saw back in the 1950s—this time with his camera in tow. So he drove 16,000 miles and turned the images in his head into documented images on film.

Another time, he was in San Francisco on business and heard about specific lek grounds in Nevada, where male sage grouse perform their mating rituals. Following the lead, he drove from San Francisco to the spot in northern Nevada and was able to witness the dancing display modeled by sage grouse. This only took eight to 10 rolls of film and several hundred miles, not to mention a night or two of sleeping in his car.

“I try as best I can to tell a story with every photograph.”

Besides time, it takes a lot of shots in near-perfect conditions to get the right picture, especially with animals, which are constantly

Tom Sears Photography

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Check out more of Tom's images on his website. Many nature and wildlife prints are for sale, ranging from \$30 to \$125, depending on the size. Tom also sells his prints at local flea markets.

You can also purchase his book online: *Many Splendored Things: Images of Nature*. It is the quintessential coffee table book—a lovely 118-page collection of Tom's photographs of birds, bears, and other wildlife. The cost is \$40.95 for a hardcover; \$26.95, softcover.



moving. He has switched to digital, although he held out and used film for as long as he could. He admits that digital photography does allow more control and opportunity to take multiple shots.

“I don't expect every photo to come out, but at least one or two out of 100 shots.” Tom said.

In many cases, being in nature and taking pictures could lead to damaged equipment and precarious situations. Tom has ruined more cameras than he likes to admit. But how many people can say they've been in a

zodiac boat within a few feet of blue whales and sperm whales?

These days, Tom does not travel far, nor does he get outside as much as he used to. Luckily, New Hampshire has plenty of moose, bear, deer, fox, birds, and other critters, as well as beautiful flowers and scenery in his backyard that make a pretty picture.

“I won't stop until my body or head gives out,” claims Tom, who turns 79 in July.

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