



NICK NICHOLS'S ARRESTING INTIMACY WITH THE WILD WORLD

By Peter Canby, June 13, 2017



The work of the wildlife photographer Michael (Nick) Nichols is widely admired for the intimacy he achieves with his animal subjects—an intimacy that allows the subjects to become wild individuals rather than generic wildlife. As Melissa Harris, the author of “A Wild Life: A Visual Biography of Photographer Michael Nichols,” puts it in her book, “Nichols intently focuses on specific characters and always there’s a sense of parity with himself.”

Nichols was born in 1952 and grew up in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, the son of a heavy-drinking mother and a sometimes truck-driver father, who left when Nichols was three. After a stint in the Army, Nichols went to the University of North Alabama, where he was lucky enough to be taken under the wing of the Alabama-born photographer Charles Moore, known for his documentation of the civil-rights movement. Always high-spirited, Nichols moved with his wife, Reba, to San Francisco, where he began working on assignments for Geo magazine with the gonzo journalist Tim Cahill. (Several of their assignments—a hike across Death Valley, a descent into the second-deepest “cave pit” in America—are collected in Cahill’s anthology “A Wolverine is Eating My Leg.”)

People began to refer to Nichols as “Nick Danger,” but the label, he feels, was misplaced. He understood the necessity of risk-taking, but, as he explained to Harris, “I was always more controlled—which is, I think, the reason I’m still alive. I’m not an adrenaline junkie by any stretch. I’m alive because I’ve been careful.”

One of the seminal Geo assignments that Nichols undertook with Cahill was a story on the Rwandan mountain gorillas that, at the time, were being studied by the primatologist Dian Fossey. The story, which ran in December, 1981, several years before Fossey was murdered, possibly by poachers, deepened Nichols’s appreciation of both the wild world and the significance of photography. “I started off in my life . . . just wanting to chase significant images, but the gorillas changed all that. . . . I understood immediately that animals are individuals and have rights. This is where and when I find my soul.” After the gorilla spread, Nichols began shooting for National Geographic. He often sought out animals that were the subject of scientific examination: the Jane Goodall chimpanzees, in Gombe, Tanzania; the Samburu elephants, in Kenya; a

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family of tigers in Bandhavgarh National Park, in India; and a clan of lions in Tanzania's Serengeti Park. In many instances, he had detailed family trees at his disposal.

Nichols is not a "linear talker," Harris says, in "A Wild Life," and much of his work lives at the intersection of data-driven, evidentiary science and what the science writer David Quammen, who often works with Nichols, affectionately characterizes as "Nick Science." "Nick Science," according to Quammen, is based on Nichols's own observations, and may or may not correspond to what scientists agree upon. "Nick's not there to illustrate 'science-science,' " as Quammen puts it, "but his intuition brings him closer to those animals." Harris notes "Nick's desire to understand and convey the interior lives of his subjects," which explains why many of his images "burn with such preternatural intensity and eloquence." Some of Nichols's most extreme work has come out of the remote forests of Central Africa. With the explorer Michael Fay (and often with Bambendjelle Pygmy guides), Nichols has travelled through some of the most forbidding terrain on Earth—including the Nouabalé-Ndoki forest, in the Republic of Congo, which the writer Douglas Chadwick has described as a "claustrophobic hothouse." He shot so-called naïve chimpanzees, which have never seen humans before; western lowland gorillas; forest elephants; and, in the dark light of the forest floor, the Bambendjelle themselves. At this point, Nichols's career as a wildlife photographer may be winding down. He's had five meniscus surgeries on his knees, and he has a bad back and a recurrent case of blackwater fever. His spirit, however, remains the same. Asked by Harris to name his favorite wildlife films, he responded, "The Big Lebowski" and "Gimme Shelter."