

INTERVIEW

Lewis Kemper:

CELEBRATING THE SHEER JOY OF NATURE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

BY GRACE SCHAUB

Lewis Kemper, whose name is synonymous with outdoor and nature photography, has photographed the natural beauty of North America and its parklands for almost three decades. Originally from Baltimore, Maryland, he attended George Washington University in Washington, D.C., receiving a B.A. in fine art photography in 1976. Two years after graduating, Kemper moved westward to California. From 1978 to 1980 he worked in Yosemite National Park at The Ansel Adams Gallery, where he met and learned from some of the most highly regarded photographers of our time.

Kemper uses a 4x5 camera and a 35mm Canon digital camera for his outdoor and landscape work. He was recently named to Canon USA's "Explorers of Light," an elite group of photographers who represent Canon by leading workshops, giving lectures and attending seminars throughout the country. He is represented by several stock agencies including Getty Images, Index Stock Imagery, DRK Photo and Superstock, and his work has been featured in national ads and on book covers in over 16 countries. His photographs have also been exhibited nationally in galleries and museums including the Cornell Museum, the Frederick S. Wight Gallery, Princeton Gallery of Fine Art, Popular Photography Gallery, The Ansel Adams Gallery and the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center. His work is included in many private collections and the permanent collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Kemper teaches photography and digital imaging at the Palm Beach Photographic Centre in Delray Beach, Florida, as well as at the Santa Fe Workshops, Aspen Workshops and online at BetterPhoto.com.



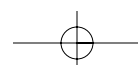
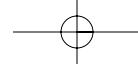
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Opposite: Sunset, Old Faithful, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, August 2007

Pages 40-41: Sunrise, Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah, April 2007



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He is a digital consultant for individuals, organizations and businesses and has his own line of training DVDs, "The Photographer's Toolbox for Photoshop." He maintains an attractive and active website — www.lewiskemper.com — where he displays and sells his images in an online gallery. He authored *The Yosemite Photographer's Handbook* and *The Yellowstone Photographer's Handbook*. He was the photographer for *Ancient Ancestors of the Southwest*, published by Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company. His work has appeared in publications by the Sierra Club and the National Geographic Society, and he is a contributing editor to *Outdoor Photographer* and *PC Photo* magazines. In short, he's a busy man.

To get a sense of how Kemper approaches his art and craft, I spoke with him after attending one of his Canon-sponsored workshops in Yellowstone National Park.

GS: When did you get so involved in photography, nature and the great outdoors?

LK: As a kid I was always into the outdoors — catching tadpoles, exploring our neighborhood stream, etc. I began my journey in photography in my senior year in high school and took nature pictures right away! As a college student, I went camping, backpacking, cross-country skiing and rock climbing, and my camera came with me. After graduating I worked construction to save some money, bought a van and headed west with my cameras. I had no real plan but got lucky and ended up in Yosemite at a time when The Ansel Adams Gallery needed a photographer.

GS: How did all that work out? I know you have maintained an association with Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks for many years now.

LK: I got the job at The Ansel Adams Gallery in 1978 and worked there until the summer of 1980, then again in 1984 for about five months. I lived in Yosemite until 1989. During that period I taught for the first time and had a great opportunity to show and sell my work. The park concessionaire asked me to write *The Yosemite Photographer's Handbook*, which sold quite well.

From there I got invited to write a handbook for Yellowstone. I had been there several times before but this time I went for two weeks and traveled all around the park to work on the book. I

Opposite: Sunset, Sentinel Rock, Yosemite National Park, California, December 2004

began leading winter workshops in the mid '80s and did that for several years. And I continue to visit Yellowstone every few years or so.

GS: Working at The Ansel Adams Gallery at Yosemite must have been quite an experience for a young photographer.

LK: It was one of the best experiences of my life. Being there for Ansel's summer workshops was like walking right into my history of photography textbook from college. In fact, the author of that book was there, Beaumont Newhall. I also met Ruth Bernhardt, Paul Caponigro, Ernst Haas, Marie Cosindas, Jerry Uelsman and John Sexton, to name just a few. So for a young photography student, it was a dream come true. It also led to my first experiences teaching in a workshop environment as I got to co-teach with Philip Hyde, Cole Weston and Wanda Hammerbeck. I met my best friend and contemporary, William Neill, while in Yosemite.

GS: What were your specific responsibilities and duties, and who were the photographers you admired and learned the most from during your time there?

LK: My duties at the gallery were to run the film/photo counter, check Ansel's fine prints when they arrived, and lead the camera walks (daily photo tours) in the summer. I was in charge of ordering all the film and photo supplies we sold and making sure all the equipment got ordered for Ansel's workshops. The best part was leading the camera walks.

GS: And being around Ansel Adams wasn't too shabby either, right?

LK: Of course, watching Ansel and seeing how he related to his students was great. One of my heroes was Ernst Haas, and getting to meet him and listen to him speak was a major thrill for me. I also gained a lot from my short time with Ruth Bernhardt and Marion Patterson.

Before I ever got to Yosemite I learned so much from my college professor, Jerry Lake. He taught me to see color and how to work with color, and his influence has stayed with me.

GS: How did these experiences help you as a photographer and as a teacher?

LK: I think it really helped to see how these famous people could be so giving to their students. Also, I got to hear so many different approaches to photography that I was able to blend and mesh them into something that eventually became my style. As a young person toying with the idea of becoming a "real" photographer, it sure didn't hurt when, after showing my portfolio to Ruth Bernhardt, she looked up at me and said, "You should become a photographer!"



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Geese in Fog, Effie Yeaw Nature Center, California, January 2005

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GS: Describe your approach to photographing nature.

LK: When I approach a subject, I like to narrow down what has attracted my eye to a scene. Ansel always carried a little cut-out card and would very carefully compose his image through the card. Well, I am too lazy to carry a card, and I would lose it in a minute, but I always make a frame with my hand and try to narrow the scene down to the basic compelling elements. And I bracket compositions, shifting and changing to refine the shot for the greatest impact.

GS: What is your approach to photographing the natural wonders that all tourists journey to the national parks to see and photograph?

LK: Since they have been done so often, I always try to find

either a slightly different angle or to get the best possible light.

GS: How about photographing details in nature?

LK: That is actually my favorite. I love to turn the generic or the small details in nature into strong graphic elements. I also like to abstract nature by isolating and/or removing scale, so viewers have to think about what they are seeing.

GS: In what weather and seasons do you prefer to photograph?

LK: When I lived in Yosemite, winter was my favorite season, and I liked it for both pictures and recreation. I love the snow! Now that I live in Sacramento, my favorite season is *still* winter... but because of the fog.

GS: Are there other places that are more photogenic for you at specific times of the year?

LK: The obvious ones are anywhere back east in the autumn — the Smokies, Acadia, Shenandoah. I like the desert in the spring, Alaska in summer, the Northwest in late summer. As for Yosemite, it's best in winter.

GS: Any suggestions and advice for students?

LK: Be you. Photography, like any art, is so subjective. If you

I am not a big equipment nut. For years I only owned two lenses for my 35mm and digital systems. Recently I got a third lens, and now I have too many choices!

like what you're doing, keep doing it! If you can't make a living doing the photography you love, get another job and do your photography for love. In the beginning we all emulate others. Take all you can from others and mold it into what works best for you.

GS: What attracts you to a scene and makes you want to take a particular picture?

LK: I always tell my students that you're only doing two things when taking a picture: capturing light and placing a frame around something that exists. So for me, the first thing I look for is the light. You can be in the most beautiful place on earth, but if the light is bad the picture will never excel. But if the light is good, you can find something interesting to put your frame around.

GS: How important are filters, lenses and other equipment for your work? What cool stuff won't you leave home without?

LK: Actually, I am not a big equipment nut. For years I only owned two lenses for my 35mm and digital systems. Recently I got a third lens, and now I have too many choices! I am a stickler for the tripod, and I carry a big Gitzo carbon fiber, probably bigger than I need, but it's a holdover from my 4x5 days. I do love my 100-400mm lens, and if I could only carry one lens that would be it. As far as cool goes, I like to play with a Lensbaby. I just got an STE-2, which allows me to use my flash wirelessly and I really am having fun playing with that light, like putting my flash behind leaves.

GS: How important is Photoshop or other software for the final visualization of your images?

LK: Photoshop is essential to me. I used to print Cibachrome (Ilfochrome) and spent a lot of time trying to control contrast and color. Now, with Photoshop, I have ultimate control over the final output of my image. As Ansel always said, "The negative is the score and the print the performance." I feel my capture is just my starting point and the print, or even the finished file, is the performance.

I got into photography because I couldn't paint. I had a friend in high school who was a good artist, and I was so jealous. In my senior year I took a course that offered half the year in an astronomy class and half the year in photography. I must have liked it because I became a photographer, and I own a telescope! But I was always interested in using the camera as my paintbrush, and

Photoshop has made that a reality.

GS: Which printers and papers do you find work best for you?

LK: At the moment I use an Epson 7800 printer, although when Canon makes a 24-inch printer with their new technologies I may switch. I use several papers for printing, including Ultra Premium Luster, Hahnemuhle's Fine Art Pearl and Torchon.

GS: What are some of your latest projects and new favorite places to photograph?

LK: My latest photographic project has been an ongoing one, to photograph a local nature center in Sacramento. I realized that after leaving Yosemite I became a hunter/photographer, going on safari for a week here or a week there, hunting the best images. So I decided to find a local project where I could go back time and time again in every season, any time of day. The Effie Yeaw Nature Center is not the most spectacularly scenic area by any means, but that makes me work harder and see more creatively.

GS: Congratulations on being selected as a Canon "Explorer of Light."

LK: This was one of the biggest honors of my life. Canon is a great company, and to have them select me as one of 76 photographers in the whole country to represent them is totally awesome.

GS: What inspires and motivates you?

LK: Just the sheer joy and pleasure of being out in nature. Like the old fisherman's saying, "A bad day fishing is better than a good day at work." That is how I feel about photographing in nature. There are days I go out and never get a good picture — the light's not good, the conditions don't work out, and I start to get frustrated. Then I think about all the other things I could have had to do instead that day, and I get real happy that at least I'm out there! ▲

For more information and to view more of Lewis Kemper's images, go to www.lewiskemper.com.

Grace Schaub is an artist and photographer who writes on photography and contemporary photographers. She teaches photography at The New School in New York City and has co-authored The Marshall's Handcoloring Guide and Gallery.