



Kneeling on the shore of Fidalgo Island, Bannick scouts for birds; what he's learned can help you improve your own photography.

Shots from the wild

Nature photographer Paul Bannick shares his secrets to success

BY JENNY CUNNINGHAM

DIP AND GLIDE, dip and glide. Paul Bannick quietly approaches his quarry in a low-profile, white-and-red kayak. He's here to shoot great blue heron and he's got the big gun this afternoon: a Canon with a lens as long as your arm.

In fall, it's not unusual to find Bannick here at Mercer Slough Nature Park in Bellevue. With miles of meandering creeks and native plants that attract more than a hundred species of birds, this is his natural habitat.

"The most exciting part of this season is the increasing abundance of raptors," Bannick says, listing off his fall favorites: harrier hawks, short-eared owls, and gyrfalcons.

As the sky turns iridescent green with the setting sun, a silvery trill fills the air. Bannick listens, paddle frozen midstroke

as he glides along. "See that little splash of yellow? That is a warbler. They love the willows."

Bannick defies the stereotype of the nerdy bird-watcher. Sure, he's got bird-calls on his iPod, but look under the sensible wide-brimmed hat and you'll see a lantern-jawed guy with azure eyes and a 1,000-watt smile. Bannick is that rarest of subspecies: the happening, handsome, young (well, 43) naturalist.

Worth a thousand words

When Bannick was 9 years old, he would tromp with a camera through the woods behind his Bellevue home and bring back photos of birds to show his 12 siblings.

"I'm still just like that boy," he says. "I can tell someone about an endangered species and why it's important, and they

How to snap the shots you want

STUDY YOUR QUARRY

"Above anything else, photographers need to learn about their subject matter," Paul Bannick says. "This will help them plan photos, anticipate behavior, and respect the needs of the animal."

WALK SOFTLY AND CARRY A LONG LENS

The biggest challenge with wild animals is getting close enough to take a great image. Powerful zoom lenses are a must.

SHOOT DURING THE MAGIC HOURS The best light and liveliest

wildlife activity are just before and after sunrise and sunset.

KAYAK FOR MAXIMUM STEALTH

"You will see more birds if you approach by kayak," Bannick says.

BE PREPARED With most animals, photographers don't get a do-over. Always have the camera ready.

BE PATIENT There are days when you will come back empty-handed. "Remember," says Bannick, "just being out in nature is the best part."

JOHN GRANEN

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Patience rewarded: Bannick snaps a portrait of a trio of snowy owls.

probably won't get it. But when you show them a picture they say, 'Oh, that's what you're talking about!'"

Most of us have shots of the wrong end of an animal or bare branches where an eagle had been perched a nanosecond before. Bannick captures hovering owls locking eyes with the viewer and comical cranes whooping it up on a frozen lake.

You may have seen his striking white-on-white portrait of a Sandhill crane on the cover of *Pacific Northwest* magazine last summer or his photo of a harlequin duck, the lead image on BirdWeb (www.birdweb.org). Been to the Woodland Park Zoo lately? Some of those interpretive signs with birds are Bannick's work too. Organizations like Seattle Audubon and North Cascades Institute are using Bannick's bird portraits in campaigns to set aside habitat.

That dovetails nicely with Bannick's day job as director of development for Conservation Northwest, which aims to preserve and connect old-growth forests

and other wild areas. "Our latest project is to link the habitats of the Canadian Rockies and the Washington coast," he says.

Like many people in Seattle who today are doing exactly what they want to do, Bannick spent his share of yesterdays working in software, starting out after college as one of 75 original employees for desktop-publishing pioneer Aldus.

"It was a blast," Bannick remembers. "We really felt we were doing something that was going to change the world." Marketing jobs at Adobe and Microsoft proved less inspirational, and he decided to change his career—and his lifestyle.

"I'm drawn to photograph birds because they're ambassadors from other places. So they help people think about protecting more than their own backyard."

INFO Paul Bannick will present his work through Snohomish County's Pilchuck Audubon Society (free; Kamiak High School, 10801 Harbour Pointe Blvd., Mukilteo, WA; www.pilchuckaudubon.org or 425/252-0926) at 7 p.m. on November 10. ■

PAUL BANNICK

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