

Audun Rikardsen

He is a full-time professor of fish biology, but in the past four years Audun Rikardsen has been gaining international recognition for his photography, including the winning portfolio of the 2015 Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. And he didn't pick up a digital SLR until 2009...

Interview by Keith Wilson



By the light of the moon
Canon EOS-1DX, Samyang
14mm f/2.8, ISO 640, 35sec at
f/22, 2 x Canon 600 strobes

All pictures © Audun Rikardsen/
Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2015

You are a scientist so when did the interest in photography begin?

Well, the story goes back to when I was a teenager and joined my neighbour, who was tagging eagles, so I went with him tagging eagles for maybe five, six, or seven years.

And this was in Norway?

In the northern part of Norway, close to the Lofoten Islands. That's my home place, that's where I grew up. That municipality has the densest white-tailed eagle population in the world. So I grew up with eagles. I'm really fascinated with eagles, sitting so close to them, touching them and banding them, looking into their eyes. Then I started getting interested in photographing them, so I bought my first camera, which was an Olympus OM-10 in 1982, I think, with a 50mm lens and a Soligor 400mm.

Soligor! There's a blast from the past.

Yes, it is! I didn't want anything else, the 400mm was what I wanted for photographing eagles. I took quite a few pictures then, I was really into it, but when I turned 20 and started studying at the university, I kind of lost interest. The digital camera was coming onto the market and I found them to be too expensive for a student, and also I didn't like the quality, so for more than 20 years I didn't take that many pictures.

You graduated in biology?

My speciality was fish biology so I did a PhD in fish biology and today I work as a professor in fish biology and biology in general, but I also work with other species, like whales.

Is your fieldwork all locally based?

Yes, my fieldwork has taken me all round the northern Atlantic and a lot of it based in northern Norway. We had an Atlantic salmon project where we were tagging salmon around the North Atlantic, so it has taken me all around the North Atlantic, also to Greenland. There are several issues that have taken me into photography. I joined my colleagues in the Bear Island in the Barents Sea and I took a compact digital camera. A colleague had a Canon 5D Mk II and a 500mm lens and I challenged him by saying, 'I'm going to take as good a picture as you, it's not about the equipment it's about the person behind the camera.'

That's a very brave challenge, what was your compact?

A Canon PowerShot. It had a zoom. That was my first digital camera. It was a real awakening for me and it was really good to see the difference, so I bought a 5D. That was autumn 2009 and that was my first digital SLR. That was the start. Then in 2011 and 2012 my fieldwork brought me to Greenland and I brought my camera. I was starting to get more and more into it. We wanted to tag live salmon there and I figured the best way to do it was to join the Inuit because they were catching live cod and occasionally salmon. So I ended up being a crewmember on a Greenlandic fishing and whaling ship.

Which part of Greenland?

That was west Greenland, near Nuuk. There was only one person on that ship who spoke Danish, otherwise it was Greenlandic, but it was quite easy for me to get into it because I come from a fishing community and I know the culture, it's not that different. Also, my grandfather and two of my uncles were whalers, so I grew up with that and I had been whaling with my grandfather when I was young. So I stayed with them for a few days and I was up in the mast and we were heading towards some icebergs and suddenly I could see some black dots and they were sliding down the ice.

Seals?

Seals. I had my camera ready on the deck of the boat, and there was only one seal left, so I ran down, I jumped for the camera and the first picture I got was of the last seal falling off that iceberg. If I had been one millisecond after I would never have got the picture. With that picture I won the Nordic Nature Photography championship in 2012. That was the change. I got great motivation. From that day it really took off.

We're only talking three years ago and since then your name has appeared on a regular basis in a lot of major international awards. From that point, did you enter as many awards as you could?

No, not really. I picked out a few, like Wildlife Photographer of the Year, which I've only entered twice. My first competition was very local and I got a second place, astrophotography in Tromsø. In the beginning I didn't think my pictures were good enough. ›

"I jumped for the camera and the first picture I got was of the last seal falling off that iceberg"



Deep sleeper

Canon EOS 5D Mk III,
EF 8-15mm f/4L Fisheye
USM at 15mm, ISO 1000,
1/160sec at f/10, flash



Sea eagle snatch
Canon EOS-1DX, EF
8-15mm f/4L Fisheye
USM at 15mm, ISO
2000, 1/2500sec at f/8

◀ **You still have a proper job, as we say, a day job?**
Yes, and that’s my challenge. My biggest challenge is time. I have a 100 per cent job as a professor at the university in Tromsø.

Is that the same university where you graduated?
Yes. Then I have an extra job, maybe 20 per cent of a job

at a Norwegian institution of nature research, and then I have my photography, and I still have a girlfriend, who I’d like to keep! She’s very patient. So my biggest challenge is time and that is why nearly almost all of my pictures are taken locally. I try to combine photography with my science and my fieldwork.
So, to give an example, your Wildlife

Photographer of the Year winning portfolio, was that a result of fieldwork you were doing at the time?
Part of it, but not directly fieldwork. Some of it was part of things I had done through my science, like the picture of the whale fluke. I started off by making a flash system for taking ID shots of the whales and then I thought, this is working quite well I can do more of this.

“Eagles are very suspicious. They can easily see the camera below the surface”

Also, with the sea trout in the dark, I know that river intimately and have been snorkelling so I know where to find the fish, when to find the fish, and as a scientist I know how to attract the fish with light. I am using the same methods that I use as a scientist, so having the background as a scientist I think was very important for making that picture.

Do you think having trained in the natural sciences can be something of an advantage as a photographer?
Yes, I think so, because you have a better understanding of what is happening in nature, you have a better understanding of the behaviour of the animal, and you often have a better story behind the pictures. People have been asking why I have been successful and I think it’s two things. One, that I take my pictures locally in an area, which I know really intimately. And the second one is that I know the animals or the subjects that I’m picturing, and combining those two that’s the strength. By knowing the subject and living in the area you can be there in the exact right moment.

How do you see yourself developing as a photographer, because some of your most dramatic pictures are taken from just beneath the surface.
For example that eagle picture. That was an idea that came up a long time ago, when I was a teenager. I was thinking how would it look from the animal or the prey’s perspective? Usually people take this picture of the eagle while standing on a boat, partly looking down on the eagle and take that same picture of the eagle taking the fish. I thought how would it look for the fish? Does it realise it’s being dragged up? I had that thought in my head since I was a teenager.

Back in the days when you were tagging sea eagles?
Yes. I started out using a floating remote-controlled camera and pictured it taking the bait from the camera on the surface. So I thought this is working, maybe the next step is to submerge the camera and do that picture I’ve been dreaming of my whole life, which I did. It was ▶

Canon EOS-1 DX, Tamron
SP 70-200mm f/2.8 Di VC
USD at 70mm, ISO 2000,
1/250sec at f/3.5, flash



the most trying and testing time, failing and trying again and failing and swearing, I got more and more stubborn and said I will never give up! So after three years of failing and using every holiday for that picture, when I finally succeeded – I had only two successes – it was just a relief. Luckily, I was alone in my boat out there and I was screaming in my boat so loud I don't know if they could hear me on the land. I was swearing, I was dancing, it was just a relief when I saw I had the picture. As a photographer that was one of my proudest moments.

How did you submerge the camera and keep it fixed in position? Did you lose any cameras?

I have lost a few cameras but not on that shot luckily. I anchored up the camera in an area where I know about the depth, but that was not easy and I had to have the camera focused at 70cm below the surface. Then I have an extremely thin monofilament thread touching a bait, which was a dead cod, and then I had a 100 metre long cable that went from the camera that was anchored, up to the surface 100 metres away to a Pocket Wizard transmitter and I was sitting in a boat 100 metres away from there hoping to attract attention from the eagle.

So you still had to fire it remotely when you saw the eagle getting the cod?

Yes, yes, yes. I was waiting and I got it once before but it failed because of the focusing, but I knew I could get, but there are so many variables. You have to have the right eagle. I picked the eagle that I think could make it...

How do you mean the right eagle?

You have to have an eagle that trusts you. Some are really suspicious of new things. If you dress like a fisherman, then they are trusting, but all new things are dangerous for them. They are very suspicious. The eagle can see the camera, because it's a big camera with a big dome, so they can easily see the camera below the surface. I also needed the right light direction and the right wind direction because the eagle takes the bait against the wind and then I needed the light facing it towards the eagle, so it doesn't see the camera underneath the bait. So I had so many tries where it was so close, maybe 50 to 100 times in the last millisecond they aborted.

“By knowing the subject and living in the area you can be there in the exact right moment”

Can you give me some idea about how often you use bait for your photography?

Not very often. This is also often a real situation, since much of the diet for the eagles is from fish guts thrown overboard from fishing boats.

In which instances do you think baiting

is unacceptable? I'm just wondering, where you draw the line?

I would never use live bait. If I use bait, I use baits that are already in the diet of the animal that I want to photograph, and the bait is usually left overs that were not killed in the purpose of being bait, so fish guts that I have collected from local fishing boats, used as bait for the eagle.

Which cameras and lenses do you mostly use?

I started out with the Canon 5D Mk II and I now have the 5D Mk III and the 1DX and also the 60D. I have all the lenses from the fisheye to 600mm. The 600mm is definitely the most expensive one but it is also the one I use the least as I tend to use wide-angle lenses more and more. The reason is because I'm trying to get really



The last rays
Canon EOS 5D Mk III,
EF 16-35mm f/2.8L
II USM at 18mm, ISO
2000, 1/200sec at f/6.3

◀ close to the animals, so there's more intimacy with the animal, but it also shows more of the environment, so you get that feeling of nearness much more than you would with a telephoto.

How are you going to get the balance right between doing a job you love with the excitement you get out of photography?

Time is the greatest challenge but what I try to do to solve that is to combine them, which I think is a win-win situation because I use a lot of my pictures for teaching students. I see the pictures are a very powerful tool to give information to students and others. They are also used for recruitment and I use the opportunity as a scientist to take pictures of fieldwork. It is a challenge but it is still quite new to me and I didn't plan for it to be so successful.

Do any students come up to you saying they are inspired to do more with their own photography after seeing your work?

Yes. Not necessarily to do more photography, although some do photography, but more get inspired by my pictures and my stories behind them. In my lectures I try to give stories behind the pictures and they remember it. I find it very satisfying that I can tell those stories

with my pictures and teach students about nature and about conservation and animal behaviour. If this could recruit more people for studying biology or being more concerned about nature conservation then it's really great. More students come to my lectures because I tell stories with my pictures. They remember pictures much more than they remember words, so quite a few teachers could benefit by using less text and more pictures.

“Teachers could benefit by using less text and more pictures”

Exhibition information

The exhibition of the 51st Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition is running at National History Museum, London until 10 April, 2016

- Opening times: **10.00–17.50 daily (last admission 17.15)**
- Visitor enquiries: **+44 (0)20 7942 5000**
- Admission: **Adult £15, child and concession £6.75, family (up to two adults and three children) £36.90**
- **Free for Members, Patrons and children under four**
- Nearest tube: **South Kensington**
- Website: **<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/wpy>**

Wildlife Photographer of the Year is owned by the Natural History Museum

Audun Rikardsen

Audun Rikardsen grew up in northern Norway and became a professor in biology before embarking on a second career as an award-winning nature photographer. He is based in Tromsø, where he lectures in the Department of Arctic and Marine Biology at the Arctic University of Norway.

● **<http://www.audunrikardsen.com>**

Splash time with buddy

Canon EOS 5D Mk III, EF 8-15mm f/4L Fisheye USM at 15mm, ISO 2500, 1/160sec at f/10, flash

