Steve Winter

More than any other photographer, **Steve Winter** is dedicating his photography to saving the world's big cats, in particular the tiger. His latest book *Tigers Forever* is the culmination of ten years of work tracking and photographing tigers from India to Indonesia

Interview by Keith Wilson

A tiger peers at a camera trap it triggered while night hunting in the forests of northern Sumatra, Indonesia
Canon EOS Digital Rebel XTi, EFS 10-22mm f/3.5-4.5 USM lens at 16mm, ISO 200, 1/160sec at f/11
©Steve Winter/National Geographic

Interview

When did you first develop an interest in tigers?
Interesting question. I was not an animal guy when I was young. I didn't photograph an animal until I was 34. When I was a kid I wanted to be a photojournalist for *National Geographic* magazine.

Did you get the magazine at home?
Right. My dad subscribed. He was an amateur photographer. We had *Life* magazine. We had a lot of books about photography, like Eugene Smith, the classics, so that was really good because I got to see the history and the masters but it wasn't until I was trying to make a living – I think a lot of this came from Nick Nichols because I was his assistant.

When did you first get to know of Nick Nichols?
When I used to open his yellow boxes at Photographers Supplies in San Francisco. When I was a student I would open the boxes and look at his pictures then put them back perfectly!

His Kodachromes?
Yeah! He was then working for *Geo* magazine, I don't even know if Nick knows this. I went to school in San Francisco and Nick was living there, so I had heard about him. I started to see his work and although I had no interest in caves – that's how he got started, doing caving photography, guys on long ropes with big flash bulbs and everything – he did gorillas and there was just something about what he did that I liked.

So how did you get to meet?
He would come in to get the films, so I introduced myself, said I was a photojournalist. They invited me over to where they were living and I went over and met him, Reba (Nichols' wife) and their son. I didn't see him again for about a year. I went to show him some work.

How old were you at this time?
About 24, maybe 26. I quit college and went around the world for two years, didn't know what I wanted to do. I only knew how to do one thing, taking pictures. I wasn't good at anything else.

A tigress cub cooling off in a large waterhole in Bandhavgarh, India
Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 600mmf/4L IS USM lens plus 2x converter, ISO 400, 1/350sec at f/9.5
©Steve Winter/National Geographic

Did you do a course in photojournalism?
No, in the end I did my own stories. I did my own show in the public library of a county hall in Indiana, my home state, when I was 14. That was pretty cool, because I used to walk around and emulate the photography of the guys I liked in my pictures. People look at some of my first work and they think it's by somebody else.

"I didn't photograph an animal until I was 34. When I was a kid I wanted to be a photojournalist for National Geographic"

So how did you become interested in tigers?
As far as tigers go, I started getting interested in animals by meeting scientists, doing a story for the first time for Merck Pharmaceuticals when I was at Black Star. I had already started at *National Geographic*. They had a job to go down and cover the people who were trying to find new drugs from the rainforest, so it was covering people and what they do, but also in the rainforest, which I'd never been before.

Which country was this?
Costa Rica. The National Biological Diversity Institute of Costa Rica. Merck and some other pharmaceutical companies were giving money to them because 50% of all our drugs come from nature. Certain plants work. Aspirin comes from the bark of a tree. Tiger bone does jack shit. If you want to eat the marrow of any bone it's going to be healthy for you, but it's not going to cure anything. Rhino horn doesn't cure cancer. The whole idea of tigers was a bit daunting to me in the beginning because the last tiger story (in *National Geographic*) was done by Nick Nichols, and I had never followed in the footsteps of my mentor.

Can you describe for me what it was like to photograph a tiger for the first time?
It was more of a shock. It was just shock and it was an accident. We were in Kaziranga in northeastern India in elephant grass 20 feet high, and we came around the corner on a jungle track and there was this tiger lying up against the grass.

Were you on elephant back?
A Jeep. Kaziranga doesn't use elephants much, which is probably good. Riding an elephant isn't the best thing in the world for the elephant. They have a lot of logging elephants in Assam, but riding an elephant on poaching patrols is good

A camera trap captures a young male tiger in elephant grass, Kaziranga National Park, India
Canon EOS Digital Rebel XTi, EFS 10-22mm f/3.5-4.5 USM lens at 15mm, ISO 200, 1/200sec at f/9
©Steve Winter/National Geographic

Right: These men were apprehended in January 2011 while trying to sell a tiger skin near Chandrapur, India. Police received the tip from the Wildlife Protection Society of India. They were members of an extended family from a nearby village
Canon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 24-105mm f/4L USM lens at 73mm, ISO 400, 1/125sec at f/8
©Steve Winter/National Geographic

because that's how you're going to find guys on foot. It could also be the way you die as a guard because poachers have AK-47s and an elephant is a big target.

I think the only way I can explain my relationship with tigers would be to start with jaguars, because I did *National Geographic*'s first jaguar story. I was visited by a jaguar on my first story in Guatemala, and that was the first situation I ever felt threatened by a wild animal. I was sleeping in my bunk at night, by myself in a one-room shack on top of a mountain, and a jaguar walked up the stairs and scratched under the door and sniffed. I thought it was some man coming to kill me because the loggers didn't like the fact that this area was protected, and I had already seen them walk through the forest with guns. They had shot the naturalist I was working with – his father and his brother. So when I heard the stair creak I thought for sure it was one of them coming to get me, but it was a jaguar who was curious about who was staying in his area.

You must have smelt good Steve...
Boy, was I scared! You hear the stairs creaking, you have no idea what it is. The door was locked but when you here this scratching, just like a house cat, I grabbed my machete next to the bed and smacked it against the bare wood of the bed and nothing happened. Then I whistled and that's when the cat left. Then he came to visit me once more in my blind (hide). I thought it was a monkey because all I saw was a tail. It was a black jaguar.

"I'm more optimistic because I think the people involved with tigers, that know them the best and the countries they're in, won't stop until they are protected"

Who gave you your first tiger photography project?
Me. I wrote a proposal for National Geographic for Kaziranga National Park. Now, I didn't do it on tigers, I did it on the park. My idea was this park has major problems that other parks around the world have but I felt Kaziranga was unique because it has over 75 percent of the remaining one horned rhinos, so if something happens to it, that's it pretty much. We've lost one of the rhinos in Africa (Western black rhinoceros), we may lose the rest of them now because of the Vietnamese and Chinese.

Yes, 2013 is already the worst year ever for rhino poaching...
Yes, and it's all because of one jackass in Vietnam who said he was cured of cancer by rhino horn. That's what's driving the poaching. The people at the university in Beijing that do very good things with plants and stuff need to say that these certain things don't work, but they can't because the top officials in the communist party all drink tiger bone wine. That would make them all look like fools if they all of a sudden said, 'This doesn't do anything.'

When I met you a year ago, you were the first photographer I had spoken to who actually expressed optimism about the future of the tiger. One year on, are you still as optimistic?
I'm more optimistic because I think the people involved with tigers, that know them the best and the countries they're in, won't stop until they are protected. They would never stop and watch the study animals of the species they love the most go extinct. There are many reasons. Look at tourism. How much money does that bring in? If there's no tigers, there's no tourism. In Sumatra, you have a guy who's a billionaire that loves tigers, so he puts in an enclosure for man-eaters, so they're not sent to zoos, and they're monitored. There's minimal human impact when they're captured and brought in. It's a big enclosure so it's part of the forest, and then they're relocated. He pays for the protection of the area. Now they have the highest density of tigers anywhere in Sumatra.

Other photographers of tigers I have spoken to have real fears for them, particularly in India
I don't. There's unknown areas. The places where all the tourists go, they might disappear. I just said they won't

A wary three-month old cub in Bandhavgarh briefly investigates our intrusion before ducking behind his mother. This tigress gave birth in the same remote cave where she was born
Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 600mm f/4L IS USM lens, ISO 1600, 1/180sec at f/11

A tiger cub inspects the remote camera car at Bandhavgarh...

...taken from the remote camera car
Canon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 24-85mm f/3.5-4.5 USM lens at 30mm, ISO 800, 1/500sec at f/8
©Steve Winter/National Geographic

because of the economic value of the tiger, but in the north, the tri arc of Corbett and all that area that goes into Nepal and into Bhutan, and the area in the south, the Western Ghats, that's a huge range of protected areas that are somewhat connected. You need to have a source population of tigers with a way for the tigers to disperse when they have to leave and find their own area, that's the issue. How do you find your own area in arguably the most populous country in the world? That's the problem with a wide-ranging animal such as the tiger in a populous area.

So how did you get the idea for the book?

The *Tigers Forever* book became 10 years of my work on tigers. I originally began with the Hukwng Valley story, where I was in far northern Burma and the story ended up running in *Geo*. It was a last minute thing where Alan Rabinowitz (CEO of Panthera) asked me if I wanted to go with him. Alan realized the value of photographs. He's going into an area that's highly restricted. There's only been a couple of Westerners that have ever been there – they were mountain climbers from Japan – and they didn't do what we did! So the story starts in the Hukawng, goes to Kaziranga, the highest density of tigers in the world. I photographed one of my favourite tiger pictures ever with a 600mm. Our job primarily is to get policy makers to understand about saving tigers in the next generation. So we took Hukawng Valley, Kaziranga, Sumatra, Thailand, India, and put it all into a book. And it was 10 years of work. You can also see rhinos and elephants in this story, and poachers.

Why does Kaziranga have such a high density of tigers?

One of the things I like is that Kaziranga to me is the only historic landscape that I have ever been to. Tigers used to live with other things than deer and monkeys. They only live with deer now because poachers have killed everything else. South India is another historic landscape where tigers still live with many different species, including elephants. Kaziranga has elephants, four species of deer and rhino. It's a landscape that looks like something out of history. That's why it's an historic landscape. So I thought it would be good to put these other animals into the book because tigers co-exist with them. Nature has its balance when everything it put there is still there, because it would die out on its own if it wasn't supposed to be there, now wouldn't it? So if Kaziranga is historic, then everything works.

Wildlife photographers, including Nick Nichols and yourself, are using camera traps more than ever. Why is that?

Well, Nick doesn't use camera traps so much now. He uses a small remote car. I used a car on tigers but it broke, so I no longer have it. I couldn't fix it in the field. He had to make another car for lions, it broke, then he got a robot tank that holds two cameras, one video, one still. It's small but it weighs 70 or 80 pounds, which is good because you don't want a tiger to knock it over, or in his case the lion.

It gives a great perspective, doesn't it?

I never got the pictures I wanted with the tigers because it broke!

What was the picture you were after?

Like something Nick was doing, just natural behaviour. They have to get accustomed to it. You're photographing tigers lying on the ground, feeding; if I could get that car up to it, that would be great. Media is suffering a dramatic change. *National Geographic* magazine is doing really well electronically. The iPad edition is incredible because it's not a page, it's interactive, it's like a doorway into the usage of other kinds of media that can come from the still photograph. One of the reasons I asked them to make a video camera trap four or five years ago was because I knew we needed to make good video to make the still image come alive. If I'm using camera traps, they don't really work much if an animal walks by the camera, but on one of the snow leopard pictures where it's marking its territory it would work beautifully. So if some of the major wild images that I have would come alive by video that would be cool.

Steve Winter is a photojournalist ands specializes in wildlife, especially big cats. He has worked for *National Geographic* since 1991 and was named Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 2008. That same year he won first prize in the nature story award from *World Press Photo*. Steve also serves as director of media for Panthera, the world's largest big cat conservation charity, and lectures globally on conservation and photography.
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Twitter: https://twitter.com/swfoto

Fourteen month old tiger cubs cool off in a watering hole at Bandhavgarh National Park, India
Canon EOS Digital Rebel TLi, EFS 10-22mm f/3.5-4.5 USM lens at 18mm, ISO 400, 1/200sec at f/16
©Steve Winter/National Geographic

Thai biologists sedate this tigress to fit her with a satellite collar in Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary. They discovered she was pregnant, making her a valuable study animal
Canon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM lens at 19mm, ISO 400, 1/15sec at f/9.5 ©Steve Winter/ National Geographic

What advantage do camera traps have over hide photography?
In a hide you focus the camera on an area where you thought an animal was going to come. Whether it's a bird nest, the edge of a forest, a salt lick or a water hole. In my opinion, you're going to end up getting the same image over and over again with a long lens. The powers that be at *National Geographic* don't like those images any more, but they didn't like them till after I started using camera traps! I started using camera traps because it was the only answer to the problem: how do you photograph elusive animals? When I did snow leopards, it was because I had to, but in Kaziranga, where I continued to use camera traps, it was because I wanted a different image. With a camera trap I'm getting this close, wideangle intimate view. I was really tired of those long lens blind shots. It's the same picture, it's really tight, but you don't see the habitat. Let's see the habitat in the picture, don't zoom in, otherwise you can't see where the animal lives and there's no context.

So when you're using a camera trap what sort of wideangle lens is it? Is it a zoom or a fixed wideangle?
A 10-22mm is what we normally use, so it becomes a 16-35mm, because it's not a full frame sensor.

Finally, do you really think tigers are forever?
Yeah, I really do believe that we can save tigers. But what we need to do is save these large landscapes because if we save the tigers we save everything underneath them. We also save ourselves, because anyone that takes a damaged landscape and repairs it, the watershed is better, habitat is better, the animals come back, everything is healthy again. Tigers and the tiger landscapes, it's the same with lions, it's the same with jaguars, you have to save these landscapes. That's why Alan Rabinowitz and Panthera sees saving these cats is about saving these large landscapes.

Tigers Forever, featuring the magnificent photography of Steve Winter, published by National Geographic and Panthera, is now available from all major book outlets and Amazon. SRP: £30.
A portion of the sale of each book will go to Tigers Forever to help save the tiger.
www.TigersForeverBook.com
Panthera's donation page:
http://www.panthera.org/action-center/donate