



# Shooting Solo

Alone, with Camera, in Southeastern Idaho

Story and Photos by Linda Lantzy

**T**he howling of a pack of coyotes sounded uncomfortably close.

After taking a mere three shots of a delicate crescent moon over the Centennial range, I convinced myself it was time for bed and put away my camera and tripod, knowing that I was giving in to fear.

It was the first time I'd ever undertaken an adventure like this, alone, searching for perfect autumn photographs. Leaving Coeur d'Alene in the morning, I had been filled with anticipation, and the radio was cranked. I stopped whenever and wherever I felt pulled to do so. But now that night was closing in, I climbed into my 4WD and had to push back feelings of self-doubt as I resolved to see this thing through.

ABOVE: Crescent moon over the Centennial Mountains.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: Moose calf in the Teton River; a bend in the Teton; leaf in the South Fork.

Leaving the window open a crack for fresh air and positioning my bear spray where I could locate it should I need to venture outside during the night, I tried to find a comfortable position on the new memory foam mattress that had been delivered the previous day. I hadn't taken into account the three days recommended for the foam to rebound into a thickness that would provide cushioning against the hard, uneven surface on which I was now attempting to sleep. The overnight low forecasted for the



nearest town, Island Park, was thirty-seven degrees, and I knew it would drop well below that in this mountain meadow. As the last light faded and the crickets chirped, I pulled all five blankets over myself and switched out my headlamp. I lay there thinking about my life up until now, and about what might lie ahead for me. I always produce my best photographic work in solitude, and with years of landscape photography experience behind me, the next logical step was to be on location alone, overnight. Sleep finally came for a few hours before I felt compelled to rise at first light.

When shooting alone, I've mastered the "out the door in ten minutes flat" technique, and this morning was no exception. With no one else to wait on and without even the hassle

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ABOVE: Dawn at Henry's Lake.

OPPOSITE FROM TOP: Backlit aspen; Upper Mesa Falls.

of a tent, I was responsible only to myself, and resolved not to be late for a sunrise shoot. As my breath fogged the viewfinder in the chilly morning air, my enthusiasm for this trip was renewed, and I felt I would not waver again. My hiking boots crunched on dried grasses covered in frost, and mist rose from a small pond. The first light touching the mountain peaks confirmed, once again, that photography is my passion, my soul, and my joy.

I spent the first full day following whatever urge or pocket of golden aspens beckoned to me, taking any back road that seemed to head in the right direction. The exploration is as much fun to me as the photography, and when a one-lane, rutted dirt road climbed steeply or crossed a shallow, boulder-packed stream, I paused only momentarily to shift the

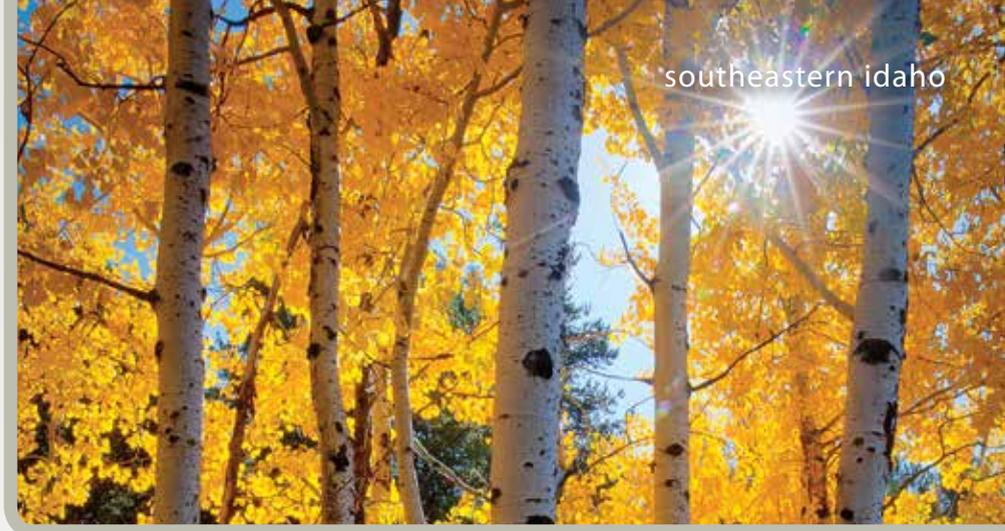
4WD into a low gear drive, the better to savor the adventure.

Five hours later, with cow manure caking my shoes and hundreds of files on my compact flash cards, my tires touched asphalt and finally reached a speed above 25 M.P.H. I set Driggs as the destination on my GPS and then promptly disobeyed the instructions. Making a quick stop at Upper Mesa Falls, I followed any turn that looked appealing and led in the general direction of the Teton Valley.

By 4 P.M., I was sitting in the tall grass above a sweeping bend in the Teton River, enjoying the slight breeze with the sun against my back and the glorious mountains in front of me. Prepared with water, cookies and a book to pass the time until sunset light, I soon found ample entertainment in watching activities on the river. Boats

were launched, fishermen cast flies, curious folk inquired about my equipment, families picnicked. I saw a canoe approaching, readied my camera settings and asked if I could photograph them as they paddled by. With their consent, I made what felt to me like a quintessential Idaho fly-fishing image.

A cow moose and her calf rose from their daytime nap in the thick riverside vegetation on the distant bank and wandered away downstream. Suddenly, as the sun dipped low on the horizon, I noticed the mooing of cows getting ever louder. Before I knew what was happening, they emerged a couple hundred feet downstream and splashed into the water, driven by a few cowboys and a dog. It was a spirit-of-the-West



southeastern idaho

sight for this Idaho girl, made even more spectacular by the beautiful evening light. I felt a pang of regret, having just packed up my camera gear.

Next day, the alarm woke me earlier than my body was ready for, and after loading the Jeep in total darkness, I realized I'd not set it to Mountain time. With an extra hour to spare, and



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ABOVE: Fall Creek Falls.

OPPOSITE FROM TOP: Autumn colors in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest; Palisades Creek.

having not previously decided on a morning destination, I headed south over Pine Creek Pass to catch sunrise in the Swan Valley at Fall Creek.

Solitude is such an important part of my creative process that my heart sank when I arrived to find another vehicle in the pullout. I resolved to make the best of it, knowing the best vantage point was likely to be taken, but it was just one photographer sharing the site.

We both fiddled with our gear and shivered in silence on the bluff overlooking the South Fork. When the silence became awkward, I finally broke it with some silly question. He seemed to welcome the interaction, as he enthusiastically told me of his travels from Germany to photograph key western locations in no less than seven states for five weeks. Sleeping in a rental car that

was smaller than my own cramped quarters, half a world from home, his adventure made my five-day escapade pale in comparison.

Only the sound of camera shutters firing broke the silence as the sun crested the Salt River Range and illuminated the falls in golden morning light. Packing our gear, we discussed our plans and wished each other success. Next on his journey was Grand Teton National Park, and I was heading south in search of red mountain maples. It was funny to bump into him again, not once, but twice more over the next three days.

As I continued on the dirt road paralleling the South Fork, the forest gave me peeks at splashes of color, and then revealed pockets of golden aspen, and finally entire hillsides bathed in autumn splendor. Crossing the

Palisades Dam, I hiked in the shade along Palisades Creek on a perfect late-September day. But it was too early for autumn color in the protected canyon, so I took a much-needed walk, listening to the lullaby of the water and admiring the beautiful environment. It was a therapeutic way to spend the later part of the morning.

Entering the Caribou Mountains south of Palisades Reservoir, I continued to follow my instinct to drive any side road that beckoned. By early afternoon, the day's 4 A.M. start was catching up with me and I pulled off the road for a rest. Thank goodness for cell service in the most unlikely places. After listening to the radio with the headlamps inadvertently left on and browsing the Internet on my smart phone, the batter-



ies for both my vehicle and phone were almost dead. OK, I thought. I can handle this. I dug out an emergency power station and attempted to jump-start the vehicle. No such luck. I called home, so someone knew where I was, and then tried to get help from my roadside assistance program. After being asked five times for my address and trying to



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ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Rainbow in the Caribou Mountains; dawn over Island Park; Snake River Road.

explain the concept of a national forest to someone back East who clearly had never ventured off pavement, I finished off my phone battery with a call to the local sheriff's office.

I can't say I was scared, rather more annoyed with myself for causing this to happen, but most of all I was frustrated at the prospect of missing the evening's photography. The hours crept by and as I began to resign myself to the idea that I would spend the night here, I heard the first and only vehicle for hours. A local man, out for a day of hunting, stopped and jump-started my car.

I found a great little camping spot near the top of a ridge, and from this vantage point overlooking a valley of autumn colors, I marveled at the beauty surrounding me, and the fact that I had it all to myself. My confidence was building, as was a sense of accomplishment. Time alone can be powerful in so many ways.

Then I heard the sounds. Loud, crashing, powerful sounds, closing in on my camp. I tried to make sense of it. For a split second, I thought about

hiding in the Jeep. Whether frozen with fear, or just a lacking time to act, I stood and watched as a huge bull moose came lumbering into view uphill and across the road. Looking back, I don't know why I felt relief that it was not a bear. Death by moose seemed only a bit less unpleasant. Maybe I just hadn't given it enough thought. I didn't so much as flinch as he crossed the road, charged through my camp, and continued his thunderous descent into the ravine.

I exhaled, and made a peanut butter and honey sandwich for dinner. A distant thunderstorm swept across the mountains to the south at sunset and bathed the sky in moody color. And then, as if to finish off this day of new experiences, I photographed a rainbow from a stunning mountain vantage point. I really was in the perfect place and time.

I had the best night's sleep that night, knowing that whatever lay ahead, it would work out all right. The road would be bumpy, full of twists and turns, but I felt that along the way I was finding myself, my confidence, and my identity. ■