



Arkansas wilderness photographer Tim Ernst to retire his artful presentations
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Highbush huckleberry (aka farkleberry) in the Ozark National Forest, from Tim Ernst's "Arkansas Greatest Hits." (Special to the Democrat-Gazette/Tim Ernst)
Photo online: https://wehco.media.clients.ellingtoncms.com/imports/adg/photos/202904180_1121tim002a_t800.jpg?90232451fbcadccc64a17de7521d859a8f88077d

An era is ending for Arkansas wilderness photographer Tim Ernst.

Ernst is to Arkansas' wilderness what painter John James Audubon was to America's birds, and what journalist David Attenborough is to the nature of the planet. Like them, Ernst has created visual images that inspire awe for the beauty of the natural world.

Ernst says on his website, "I have been hiking, driving and crawling around the wonderful Ozark Mountains for most of my life, preserving the images I see on film for everyone to enjoy."

He has published 20 full-color coffee-table books filled with images of landscapes, animals, rainbows and brief informative commentary. His photographs have graced Hallmark calendars, U.S. Forest Service brochures, Readers Digest books and The New York Times.

His large prints and posters depict mountains, waterfalls, trees, bears and the heavens above Arkansas. They adorn the halls of public buildings and private homes. In Arkansas, a person can scarcely go into a state park headquarters, nature center, outdoors store or library without seeing one of his landscapes or trail guides.

Gallery: Tim Ernst in action

<https://www.arkansasonline.com/photos/galleries/2022/nov/21/tim-ernst-in-action/>

For many years in November and December, Ernst has made public presentations to promote his work. He compiles recent photographs to create a screened gallery around some theme -- light, life, solitude, nighttime skies, etc. These programs typically include a short welcome and introduction; a 25-minute synchronized video and slide-show accompanied by music; and a Q&A session.

The audiences ask about how he came to take a particular picture or a novel photographic technique. He answers with funny stories and vivid descriptions, not

technical photographic jargon. Afterward, he signs copies of his books.

Ernst has given 1,500 of these programs.

Since typically he gives only one a day, he has devoted more than 4 ½ years to showing his pictures to eager audiences.

However, in a few weeks his public appearances will cease. He says winter 2022-23 will be the last time he will take his show on the road. Ernst had planned to make 2020 his "swan song" tour but was put off by the covid-19 pandemic.

FINALE

His 10 final presentations will be given in 10 Arkansas cities and feature his new and final picture book, "Arkansas Greatest Hits." An eclectic work, it includes photos from 45 years -- the fruit of something like 3 million snaps of his shutter.

The task of assembling books and the expense of publishing them is "overwhelming," Ernst says. He has turned the task of marketing and distributing over to University of Arkansas Press and the Chicago Distribution Center. He will continue to sign books at the venues where he speaks, but readers generally will need to acquire their copies from a local store or online.

At 67, he no longer wants to spend his time hawking his books. He and his wife, Pam, are back-weary from lifting and hauling all those heavy boxes. His old cottage-industry method of operating a self-publishing enterprise was labor intensive.

Relying on technology and other people to ease his burden, he finds more time to enter the wilderness alone and then share that experience with others online. His new modus operandi does not involve making yet another coffee-table book or making extended speaking tours.

As he moves away from drudgery, there is still fire in his belly for the important things: solitude, creativity and the difficult artistic work required to photograph a scene in a way that inspires everyone who views it.

A GOOD DAY

In a late October interview, Ernst talked about "what makes a good day for me now."

"The day before yesterday," he said, "I got up at 4:30 or 5 and in the dark, pouring rain drove over to a spot near where we used to live and hike. It's called Hawksbill Crag. I think that's the first time I've been there in several years. When I got down there, for a brief period, it stopped raining.

"Fall color was just spectacular, but I don't think that I got any images of Hawksbill Crag on that trip that was any better than what I had previously taken. I was there for three hours and never saw another person.

"People tell me all the time you can't go there without seeing people. Well, yes you can. You've got to get up early on a rainy day. For three hours I waited, I wasn't shooting the whole time, I was hoping for some spectacular light happening, and I thought it never would. That is pretty much the way it is, the way that I have worked all these decades.

"People want to know what I'm looking for — it's great light! You can take an ordinary subject, and if you have great light on it, it can be a very interesting image. You can take a picture of an icon like Hawksbill Crag, and if the light is just kind of ordinary, so is the snapshot.

"Light was what I shopped for Thursday. While waiting for that great light, I wandered on around to a favorite high bush huckleberry that I have been watching for three or four decades. It was just spectacular! And the light behind it was spectacular too!

"The plant is unique, and very common along bluff lines. When people see my pictures of it they say, 'Oh my gosh, I've never seen anything like it.' If they went to Hawksbill Crag, they actually laid their hands on probably a dozen. It looks like a Japanese bonsai tree.

"I had photographed it before with the background in shadow. But the day before yesterday, the background was in full fall color. So it's a multilayered image that I've never taken before. It's taken me 40 years to get that picture! That's what I wanted, but that wasn't what I went there after.

"Any day we get to go out and spend three hours on the trail in the fall is a great day for me."

WRITING WITH AN IMPACT

Ernst's backpacking articles have appeared in national publications. One article generated more than 10,000 letters, emails and phone calls. His images have appeared in National Geographic, Audubon, Backpacker, Outside, Outdoor Photographer, American Hiker, Natural History, Chevy Outdoors and Sierra Club.

He is the author of more than a dozen hiking guidebooks, including "Buffalo River Hiking Trails," "Arkansas Hiking Trails" (then-President Bill Clinton wrote the foreword) and "Ouachita Trail Guide." "Arkansas Waterfalls Guidebook" details more than 200 falls, with color photos of each one.

These books have sold more than 100,000 copies nationwide.

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