

TWO WORLDS: THE LIFE AND PHOTOGRAPHY OF BILL McDAVID

Underwater, the world is deep,
dark and cold—and full of life.

Whether it is the small, lively crustaceans that scamper along the bottom of the river bed, the aquatic plants that lean and shift with the current, or the fish that dart about in their search for food, there is a lens that tries to capture it all. Moving slowly and purposefully, the camera glides into range of its target, a Westslope Cutthroat Trout with as much energy and liveliness as it has signature black spots running along its back.

For an hour, the unblinking lens has watched this fish, bolting left and then right, circling back around a boulder only to emerge again in a completely different area, snapping at the food that the swift current carries by. No one quite knows the mind of a fish and this particular trout appears to have more energy than it can expend. By contrast, the lens is calm and lazy, sitting, watching, waiting for its opportunity—like a predator.

But this predator feasts not on food, but on moments. The right moments. The unique moments. The perfect moments. Moments that usually go unobserved under the water.

Then, a ripple on the surface catches the fish's eye and faster than a human can blink, it launches toward the unsuspecting mayfly, snapping up its meal as its wet, shimmering body glints so briefly in the sun, breaking the surface before sinking back toward the safety of the riverbed with a belly a little fuller and an eye for the next treat.

In the meantime, the camera eye has snapped and its memory feasts on a moment, one that intimately captures both sides of the dynamic the line that divides two starkly different worlds: the water's surface.

A moment later, the surface of the water breaks again, but this time, it's no fish, but the camera and the talented, keen and experienced photographer behind it. Coming up from the depths, the world has suddenly changed.

☆ *If this photo looks familiar
you might recall it from
the cover of our fall issue!*

Written by **Jamie Destouet**
Photography by **Bill McDavid**

Above the water, the day is bright, warm and most of the life wears fur instead of scales, the horizons give way to mountains rather than trenches and the sun colors the verdant Montana valleys. The contrast is stark—a different world with different moments.

For Bill McDavid, both are welcome gifts in his portfolio.

“I grew up on and around and under the water,” said McDavid, nationally-recognized photographer and rural real estate broker with Hall and Hall, one of the most successful real estate brokerages in America. “My mother was a divemaster and for a time we lived at a dive resort on the Cayman Islands. If you know anything about the place, it was the place to dive in the Caribbean.”

“People would travel there from around the world, so I had a lot of experiences meeting interesting and diverse people with the ocean wilderness as a backdrop. It was also my first experience with professional underwater photographers; they would come and put on these slideshow presentations that captivated me. I read everything with Jacque Cousteau's name on it and spent countless hours on the dive boat with my Mom cataloging in my mind all the fish and other creatures I had seen on the reef.”

Later, Bill pursued photography academically in high school, learning to develop black and white film and experience the true magic of taking photos. In many ways, the old saying is true: The camera never lies. In fact, the reality is that the camera is Sherlock Holmes to our Watson eyes. Where our eyes see a misty thicket, the camera will capture the buck camouflaged amidst the oaks. And in recent years when Bill snapped a photo of his favorite sea creature, the pygmy seahorse, he captured a moment that would bring a joyful and unexpected result.

“When people see a photo of mine they appreciate I am often delivered an amusing remark. ‘Oh, you must have a really great camera!’ Well, it is true... I do have a really nice camera but that's not a necessary ingredient of taking ‘great’ photographs,” explained McDavid. “Some of my favorite images were shot on an iPhone because that is what I had in my hand when the opportunity presented itself. It's all about the right light and a good perspective. In the right hands the most mediocre camera available in today's world is capable of capturing that light and if the photographer can find and frame an extraordinary perspective then you have a good photograph. A good photograph for me is one I want to stare at... and I couldn't care less what kind of camera it comes from.”

Bill had always lived with the sea in his heart and the sea will always be a part of him; growing up, he often lived where the ocean was within a breath's reach of the salty air, but in 1992 life brought him far from the ocean and up into the land-locked state of Montana. Four years later he joined Hall and Hall. Twenty-one years later, he still works as one of their most successful brokers and has a true love for the land.

There is something special about big, bold pieces of the earth, land that has seen billions of years of evolution and thousands of years of human history. Every acre tells a story and those stories inevitably inspire us to create our own legacies and relationships with our planet. Whether it's hiking in the foothills, riding horses through the valleys, or managing cattle or agriculture, it calls for us to make our mark and also observe all that's come before.

But the water continues to call.





“I love something even more than taking the photos,” McDavid admitted. “For me, looking through my shots at the end of the day is like being a kid on Christmas morning waking up with the anticipation of unwrapping all those gifts under the tree. Sometimes those gifts are a huge surprise.”

Which is kind of a silly thought, right? Why wouldn't you know your shots? If you were there when the camera snapped, you should know exactly what you're going to see. But Sherlock always noticed the details, the nuances and after this dive, Bill McDavid discovered that the most extraordinarily tiny detail is enough to make National Geographic pick up the phone.

“I love National Geographic and had a very fond connection to the magazine growing up because my great grandfather collected every issue. That collection now belongs to me and I have tried to absorb the work of the most influential photographers in the world”. Now, because of a detail, a chance encounter with a special moment, Bill McDavid gained the publication's recognition when an editor called and published an interview about his underwater technique.

“When you're under the water, you're in a place you're not supposed to be. Humans were not meant to breathe underwater or we'd have gills. I often feel I am on a foreign planet wearing a spacesuit when I am suspended in the water column... breathing. It's a meditative place to visit and doing so with a camera in hand has given me so many amazing opportunities to make the most of my photography.”

A couple of years ago, Bill was diving in the far eastern side of the Indonesian archipelago searching for the elusive pygmy seahorses domiciled in the swaying sea fans. Some have pink polka dots and are one of nature's caricatures. They blend perfectly into their environment which is largely why they were not even discovered until recent decades. Bill has spent long moments capturing these shy creatures before venturing off to other parts of the ocean.

“It's easy to get lost in the obsession. I'm almost always diving with my wife and I sometimes lock in so tightly on a subject that I'll lose track of everything else around me: the time, my wife, the other people in the diving group, which is NOT a good thing!” he laughs. “It's your worst fear to come out of this intense focus and look around to find no one in sight and the dive boat is gone. When I saw my first stargazer, a fish with a ghastly appearance, my wife was quite upset when I brushed her away so I could make a few more attempts at taking home a special image. What I failed to understand is that she was trying to get my attention to signal me that she was low on air. Not cool on my part.”

Sometimes that focus brings you your best. Sometimes it is the last-second snap that's magical.

WHEN YOU'RE UNDER THE WATER, YOU'RE IN A PLACE YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE.

“I looked closer at this one photo of a Bargibanti pygmy seahorse and sitting on top of the head of this already tiny creature was some sort of microscopic shrimp. And even more than that, he looked exactly like he was tapdancing on top of the seahorse's head. Anyway, it was perfect.”

The photo, entitled Shrimp Hat, was a culmination of focus, patience and luck—something truly magical. And it's that magic below the waves that Bill has attempted to capture even though he lives hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean.

“I'm always striving to learn something new,” says McDavid. “The medium is constantly evolving and there are so many avenues of interest to explore. There's motion time-lapse photography, astral photography, videography and everywhere you look now there's a drone overhead. It's impossible to learn it all, but there's nothing wrong with trying! All of it has helped me greatly in marketing real estate.”

But he still missed the water.

“And so, I thought of how I might make the best of my home geography. How do I take my underwater photography skills and make use of them in a place where there is relatively little water?” The answer: Head for the nearest river. “These perspectives can expose one of the most sought-after amenities in real estate [fishing water] in an uncommon way. I can capture properties from a special vantage point, one that no one would expect.”

Such is the key to standing out in a field that is constantly expanding and becoming more accessible. Just a couple of decades ago, photography took expense equipment and lenses. In less than 20 years, the common smartphone now has high-quality photo and video capabilities. In a sense, everyone has become “a photographer”, looking at the world through a widescreen.

“In photography for art's sake I am doing only what pleases me. In real estate photography I have to put more focus on the mindset of the audience; anticipation, planning and patience are essential. Ideally, I want a real estate photograph to make the viewer want to imagine themselves in the image.”

Whether it's searching for stargazers or seahorses while deep-sea diving in the Indian Ocean or hiking the mountain peaks and valleys Montana, Bill McDavid has certainly found himself. At home. Both under the water and the big sky. ☆

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 For more information on Bill McDavid and his photography or real estate listings with Hall and Hall, please contact Bill McDavid at mcdavid@hallandhall.com; 406.542.3762 (office); 406.360.3141 (cell) or visit HallandHall.com.

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