



Michelle Theall

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER AND GUIDE

WHEN I WAS ABOUT 21, I saw a photograph that changed my life: A coffee-colored grizzly bear stands at the top of Brooks Falls in Alaska, his jaw gaping open, while a fish seemingly leaps right into his mouth. That image ignited something inside me—a raw, stripped-to-the-bone joy.

I grew up in Texas with parents who dreamed of me becoming a debutante and wished I'd swapped my sports bras and running shorts for Laura Ashley dresses. But that wasn't me—I was a tomboy, and I was gay, though I didn't know that back then. I just always felt so different from my family. They definitely didn't understand my obsession with nature: On one of our vacations, I caught a bird in the bushes and brought it to the hotel room, where it flew around and perched on the TV. I asked my parents to buy me my first camera, but since we lived in the suburbs, the only wildlife I could get pictures of was ducks at our local pond.

I worked in the magazine industry for two decades, and all the while, I spent as much time as possible photographing nature—first for myself, then on assignment. Six years ago, buoyed by encouragement from my wife of 21 years and our son, I started my own tour company. Now I lead groups through uninhabited expanses of Colorado and Alaska, and Tanzania and Kenya, where we shoot the kinds of images that take my breath away: bald eagles locking talons while fighting over a salmon, a polar bear nursing her cubs, a lion pride hunting at dawn.

A photo is like a gift you keep unwrapping. You can look at an image you captured of, say, a leopard lazing in a tree, and if you really connect with the feeling in your chest, it's as if you can travel back to that “pinch me” moment when you shot it. For me, a photo changed everything.