

30.

BEAR ABOUT TO CATCH SALMON IN MOUTH

DATE

07/2015

LOCATION

Brooks Falls,
Alaska, USA

CAMERA

Nikon D800

SETTINGS

ISO 400

300mm

f/9.0

1/1600



This is probably the best picture I've ever taken, and it marks one of the rare occasions when I've been on a trip with a particular shot in mind and I've actually managed to get it.

There have been countless times when I knew what I wanted but left disappointed. I went to Spitsbergen to get pictures of the polar bears, but they weren't sharp enough or good enough. I went to the Taj Mahal to get the classic 'Lady Di' shot over the reflecting pools, but our guide made us listen to a 15-minute lecture from a local historian, and by the time I got to the right spot the scene was ruined by hundreds of tourists! I went to Africa five times on safari, but never saw a kill. All in all, you have to expect disappointment as a wildlife photographer, but sometimes you get that little bit of luck you need.

I took this shot at Brooks Falls, where a million salmon arrive from the Pacific every July and try to jump the waterfall on the Brooks River in order to get back to their spawning grounds upstream. And every July, the brown bears are there to meet them!

When I became a wildlife photographer, I longed to go to Brooks Falls, but it was expensive, and you had to book Brooks Lodge a whole year in advance. When I eventually saved up enough to spend a week over there, I only managed to get two shots of a bear with its mouth open and a salmon in mid-air, but I was very happy with this one. In fact, I ended up framing it and putting it on my wall at home!

It's obviously an 'homage' to Catch of the Day by Thomas D Mangelsen, but it was quite a technical challenge. When people ask me how long it took to take this picture, I say, "Well, it was either a week or 1/1600 of a second, depending on how you look at it!"

Timing is everything in this kind of image. Both the time of year and the shutter speed you use. The time of year is crucial as the salmon run only takes place during a couple of weeks in July and it's hard to know in advance when it will start. I did my best, but I was probably a little bit late. That meant there were fewer fish jumping the falls, which in turn meant I had fewer chances to get the shot I wanted.

The shutter speed is obviously important because I needed to be able to freeze the action. The fish I saw jumped pretty quickly, so I needed a 'belt and braces' approach, which meant 1/1600 of a second. However, I needed to make sure that the bear's head and the fish were both in focus, so I couldn't just settle for shutter priority mode and rely on the camera to choose the aperture. Instead, I used an app called SetMyCamera on my iPhone and worked out that to get 20-30cm of depth of field I needed to set the aperture to f/9, so that's what I did.

That still left one more problem, which is that the bears only opened their mouths to grab the fish at the very last minute, so I had to concentrate for hours just in case the moment came and I missed it.

The best way I found out was to put my camera on a tripod and hold the remote release in my hand, half-pressing the button so that I was locking the focus on the eye and just waiting for the fish to jump. If I looked at the bear in the viewfinder while I was waiting, my reactions weren't good enough to get a shot of any fish jumping through the frame, so I had to focus on the surface of the water below the waterfall. As soon as I saw a fish, I'd press the

shutter release and take four or five frames. Often, it was a red herring (so to speak!), and the fish didn't actually jump, but I spent the whole week refining my method, and this was the prize.

I didn't change much in post-processing, but the final version you see here is partly down to the editing of the printer. When I had it printed out at Genesis Imaging in London, the guy there worked on the file I gave him in Photoshop. He ended up sharpening and 'warming up' the fur of the bear and taking out a long scar on its back. He probably went a little overboard, but his version is still a lot better than the one I started with!

