

Lively arts coming into focus in Alan Maltz's latest book

A trip into the Everglades reveals just how much work goes into creating the images

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'Violet is the Night Landscape' / Courtesy of Alan Maltz

Written by
Anne Claire Shilton
Special to The
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Editor's Note: *The News-Press freelancer Anne Claire Shilton recently went on a wildlife photography expedition. This story is a document of her adventure.*

IF you want to shoot wildlife photography, you need just a few things to get started. A camera, some patience and a little know-how will get you well on your way. Maybe throw in a sandwich for the trail.

But if you want to shoot an entire book of stunning, leap-off-the-page wildlife photography, you're going to need a few more things. To begin with, you're going to need a sense of adventure.

This, of course, I found out the hard way.



Bruce Hitchcock, a Chokoloskee-based photography and fishing guide, sits in a boat underneath a glorious blue sky early one recent morning in the Everglades. / Anne Claire Shilton/Special to The News-Press

Available soon

“Journey Through Paradise, Naples, Marco Island and the Everglades” by Alan Maltz with narrative by Karen T. Bartlett will be available at local Barnes and Noble Booksellers in mid-November. Copies can also be purchased through Maltz’s website, alanmaltz.com.



Bruce Hitchcock leads a reporter through the Everglades. Hitchcock helped guide photographer Alan Maltz on his quest for beautiful images. / Anne Claire Shilton/Special to The News-Press

This month, acclaimed nature photographer Alan S. Maltz is releasing a new book of photography. In “Journey Through Paradise” Maltz turns his lens on Naples, Big Cypress, the Everglades and Marco Island. To get a feel for how the images in the volume were captured, Karen T. Bartlett, who wrote the text that accompanies the book, suggested I venture out on my own photo-finding expedition.

Which is how I found myself nearly waist deep in the swamp, wondering if that thing that just brushed my leg was indeed an alligator or only (only!) a water moccasin.

“Alan’s cool, Bruce is cool, you’re cool. A good time could be had by all ...” Bartlett — who is also a talented photographer, offered generously.

Into the wild

I met with Bruce Hitchcock, a Chokoloskee-based photography and fishing guide in the late morning. He’s a more subdued guide than most — he doesn’t make corny jokes for tips, nor does he chatter incessantly in an attempt to impress you with local lore. But he’s happy to share his knowledge — which is that perfect combo of both deep and varied — with those who ask. We hopped into his agile white boat and scooted out into the Everglades.

Maltz’s book is broken into a few sections, with images of downtown Naples making up the front and natural images taking up the back. The back section is by far the thickest, and it’s jammed full of perfect bird and wildlife shots. One after the next after the next, it seems like finding and shooting critters must be like photographing fish in a barrel.

It is not. “You can go out all day looking for roseate spoonbills and not find one,” Hitchcock said. “It takes a lot of patience.”

But it also takes a good guide. Hitchcock has been exploring the waterways of Southwest Florida for more than 20 years. He’s also a trained photographer and has had shows in local museums and galleries. He both knows how to find the shot and how to help you set it up. Because of this, he just may be the perfect photography guide.

“It’s important to know your subject,” he said as we motored across a bay. “Know when they’re active and where they feed and you’ll have a lot more luck. It’s also important to know the tides. When the water is up, most of the wading birds aren’t feeding.”

We pulled up to a sandbar and he demonstrated this principal. On this day we arrived at high tide. A few birds lounged in the surf. “At low tide there can be hundreds of birds here,” he said.

But if the birds are not here, Hitchcock knows where they are. He slowed the motor and we pattered up an inlet. “Get your camera ready, they’ll be on the left,” he said. Sure enough, as we round the bend, six or so roosting spoonbills look sleepily down on us.

To get the images Maltz used in the book, Hitchcock and Maltz headed out early in the mornings, but Hitchcock said he likes sunset photo tours the best. “It’s more relaxed,” he said. “The clients usually bring a bottle of wine, we watch the sunset, it’s just very relaxed. I like the morning tours, but I like the evening ones better.”

Being relaxed is key to being a good nature photographer. Maltz said that he never really goes out with a plan, that he prefers to just let whatever’s going to happen, happen. “There’s rarely an expectation, that’s the way I like it — nice and simple,” he said. Simple, with a dash of adventure thrown in for good measure.

Into the swamp

To make sure I got the full feel of everything that went into this book, Hitchcock loaded up his rugged FJ Cruiser and drove us to

the swamp. We walked for a little ways on a hiking trail before stepping off the path and into the swamp. He stepped from the old tramline-turned-walking path and into the knee-high water without so much as breaking stride. I paused for a “photo break,” gathering my nerve while I pretended to take a shot.

Sure, the water is much clearer than that muddy-brown swamp water many of us imagine. But still, there’s alligators in there!

“Sometimes I just like to come out here and hangout,” said Hitchcock as we stood thigh-deep in the obsidian waters.

And I can kind of get it. The canopy above is thick, keeping the water cool, and the air above it surprisingly refreshing. On days when Southwest Florida feels particularly ovenlike, being in the swamp is almost like sticking your head in the refrigerator.

If I could just stop thinking every log I bumped into was actually a toothsome critter, this could actually be considered an enjoyable activity.

What I do get, however, is that putting together a book like Maltz’s magnificent “Journey Through Paradise” takes work. A lot of work.

Not only do you have to capture the images, but you have to tie it all together with flowing narrative — something writer Karen T. Bartlett has done beautifully. Furthermore, you must present it in a way that makes it worthy of inhabiting prime coffee table real estate. This book does all of those things.

Early in the volume, Bartlett describes Maltz’s goal as shooting images that make viewers think, “Oh, I never thought of it that way.”

Glossy and polished, the finished product is so very different than the day-to-day work process.

But after a day out at sea and in the swamp, I can’t help but look at Maltz’s sleek volume, think of all the behind the scenes work and say, “Oh, I never thought of it that way.”

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