

B is for Bufflehead

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Bufflehead, anyway?

A Bufflehead is a small diving duck, relatively common throughout North America.

Why did you focus your book on birds?

I've enjoyed birds since I was a kid, and when I started serious photography, they became natural subjects for me. When I first started thinking of doing a book, I wanted to make sure it had educational value for children and found that birds provide a wonderful opportunity for kids to learn about nature. More importantly, whether kids live in an urban environment or a rural one, birds are easily accessible subjects from which to learn.

Why an ABC book?

I was trying to come up with a way to share my love of nature with my daughter when a friend suggested an ABC book. Though there are tons of ABC books out there, the idea of utilizing North American birds for all the letters of the alphabet provided a fun challenge for me.

How did you pick the birds for the book?

Actually, a lot of thought went into the selection process. First, my wife and I pulled out a bird book to see if it was even possible to complete an alphabet book of North American birds. It was, and we developed a target list of birds with silly sounding names and odd appearances that would be fun for kids and not intimidating. We added birds with descriptive names that could help teach concepts, and avoided birds named for obscure ornithologists of years gone by. For U, X, and Z, we didn't have a choice as only one bird exists in North America for each of those letters. Eventually we came up with so many interesting birds, we decided to include two birds for each letter where possible, one for the upper case and one for the lower case.

Did you really take all the photographs, and how long did it take you?

Yes, all the photos are mine. The photographs in the book are from the last seven years or so. Though once I decided to work on an alphabet of birds, I spent over two years completing it.

What was the hardest bird to photograph?

Far and away, the most difficult bird to capture was the Xantus's Murrelet. They only nest on a couple of the Channel Islands off the Southern California coast and spend the rest of the time at sea. I missed out on seeing them on several pelagic trips and had other trips cancelled due to inclement weather. Finally, during my third season of attempts, I lucked out on a pelagic trip and found a pair outside of their normal range and was able to snap the images seen in the book.

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Frequently Asked Questions (continued)

What was the last bird you needed?

Though I had other “M” birds, I wanted to add a Yellow-billed Magpie to the menagerie. Not only is it a pretty bird with a descriptive name, it has an important story to tell. Over the last few years, over 50% of its population has been lost to habitat destruction and the West Nile Virus. I am hoping the book will bring a little more attention to its plight.

How much travel was required to complete the book?

Tons. My wife and I traveled extensively to capture the images for the book, though much of the photography was done while I was building my portfolio and before I started the book. Most of the images were taken in the Southeast, the Southwest, and California, though Alaska, the Caribbean, and Mexico were also on our itinerary. After our daughter was born, our travel diminished significantly until I started work on the book. Then, it was off to Minnesota for the Upland Sandpiper and Common Loons, to Arizona for the Zone-tailed Hawk, and to Southern California on multiple occasions for the Xantus’s Murrelet.

What was your most memorable moment photographing the birds for the book?

I’ve had so many great ones, especially traveling the country with my wife in our trailer. But probably the most memorable was sitting in a blind photographing birds with my 10-month-old little girl on my lap. Every time a bird came in, she squealed with delight. Even though she scared most of the birds away, I was still able to get a couple of keeper images, including the Rufous Hummingbird and the Mourning Dove/White-winged Dove images that are in the book.

Have you ever written professionally before?

B is for Bufflehead is my first book, but hopefully not my last. However, I was the Co-Editor for the Sports Section of my school paper many years ago. I co-wrote a weekly column for the paper as well.

Why did you write in the first person for each of the birds?

I had worked pretty hard on the first draft of the text and plopped my daughter on my lap and began to read it to her. She quickly hopped off in search of anything more interesting. Obviously, I needed to try something different, and writing in the first person allowed me to make the birds more engaging and captivating.

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Frequently Asked Questions (continued)

Why did you choose to write the book for a wide range of learning levels?

I wanted the book to appeal to a wide range of kids and to grow with them as their learning needs change. The photographs, letters and names are suitable as a standalone toddler book. The simple prose accompanying each image is intended to spark an interest in younger children about the wonders of birds while providing a few fun and educational concepts and facts. The back section of the book serves as a reference for older children (and adults) who want to learn more about their favorite birds from the book.

Why did you decide to self-publish?

I could come up with a lot of reasons, but mostly it boiled down to three: editorial control, timing, and financial. I had an idea of what I wanted my book to be and how I wanted it to look, and I didn't want to lose that control. I wanted (and needed) the book to be available by the holiday season, so I had to get it completed quickly. Adding a publisher to the mix would have delayed that. Finally, many authors pour their heart and soul into a book, only to reap a dollar or two in royalties. By self-publishing, I am able to make more per book, provided I'm able to sell them. That's where my business experience in sales and marketing should help me, though I must admit, the stigma attached to self-publishers is worse than I expected. . . .

What has been the hardest obstacle to overcome in getting your book to market?

Ignorance. And mostly my ignorance. It is a pretty steep learning curve trying to get a book to market. I've missed a lot of deadlines in the self-publisher's playbook and spent some money with little or no return, but generally I'm happy with how the marketing is progressing.

Fortunately, I've been lucky enough to make some wonderful contacts who have helped me get the book rolling, especially in the nature/birding marketplace.

Who did your layout, design, and editing?

Because I'm pretty handy with Photoshop and I had an idea of how I wanted the book to look, I did all the layout and design. That doesn't mean I wasn't open to advice. Neither the covers nor the title were my first choices; fortunately, my wife and my sister's family convinced me to change them to what they are now. For editorial help, I again relied on family and friends.

How long have you been a professional photographer?

Using the term "professional" loosely, about 6 or 7 years. Most of that time was devoted to building a portfolio of nature images. I have done a little portrait work, especially with kids, but I found that the digital age has driven the profitability down for that market. When I finally shot the Xantus's, I refocused my camera back on nature where it belongs.

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Frequently Asked Questions (continued)

What did you do before you were a nature photographer?

I spent about 20 years working in manufacturing, mostly in the heating and air-conditioning industry. My last assignment was running a small manufacturer, Amana Heating and Air-conditioning in Fayetteville, TN.

Why did you become a nature photographer?

Several years ago, I was given the opportunity for a career change (i.e. reorganized out of a job). About the same time I met a woman who was given a similar opportunity. So I decided to try something completely different, and I pursued my passion for nature and photography, and she elected to join me. As I built my portfolio, we traveled around North America in our trailer enjoying our beautiful continent and the wildlife it holds. Along the way, we married and had a daughter. After such an experience, the corporate world just couldn't compete.

What kind of equipment do you use?

I am a Nikon shooter, and now strictly digital. I travel with three camera bodies and an array of lenses from a 12mm wide angle to a 400mm telephoto.

What is your next project?

At my first book show in October, that was the first question many people asked me, and frankly I had to laugh. I've only had the book back from the printer for a few weeks, and I think I need to get this one flying off shelves before I work on my next one. That said, it doesn't mean I don't have a few ideas percolating around in the back of my head.

Why did you choose to donate a portion of the proceeds from B is for Bufflehead to charity, and how did you choose the ones you did?

I think it is important to give back to the community and I wanted to partner the book with conservation and environmental education efforts. The Muir Heritage Land Trust in Contra Costa County, CA is dedicated to preserving open space and important habitat where I grew up and currently live. The Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries organization works to protect critical migratory habitat in my wife's home state of Alabama. Both organizations are well respected and do great work protecting land for generations to come.

What are your hopes for the book?

Besides selling lots and lots of copies, I hope the book can help introduce nature to our children. Children today are spending too much time indoors on their computers and gaming consoles, and I hope the book helps to get them interested in the natural world and gets them outside to experience it.

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Does the book have a website?

Yes, www.bisforbufflehead.com. Though a work in progress, the site will not only promote the book, but also provide children and educators a place to learn about birds. I'm including Do-It-Yourself projects such as feeders, birdbaths, birdhouses, and even suet recipes. I am also including lesson plans on how to use the book to teach children simple concepts such as colors and anatomy and more advanced concepts such as feeding, habitats, migration, adaptation, and conservation. The site also includes links to other sites where kids can learn more about birds.

Where can we buy the book?

B is for Bufflehead will be available nationally on November 10th. Then, you will be able to purchase the book online at www.bisforbufflehead.com and on the Barnes and Noble and Amazon websites. Also, more and more local bookstores are signing up to carry the book everyday. Many nature stores, such as Wild Birds Unlimited, have signed up to carry the book as well.

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