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Photographic artist Aaron Priest captures all the light the rest of us cannot see.

INTERVIEW BY BECCA CARIFIO

Meet Aaron Priest—the Lee-based photographer known for his stellar high-resolution panoramas and timelapses. With 18 years of professional experience, his work has been featured everywhere from Space.com to CBS News (see Summersguide 2015, page 79). Here, we ask him to take us behind the curtain.

How do you sneak up on the stars?
Planning, practice, and patience! The more work you put in before shooting, the easier the post-processing is after. Both panoramas and timelapses require shooting a lot of photos before rendering them on the computer later.

How do you know when you’re in the groove?
The night sky feels much more alive to me than the day, although I love shooting both. From stars and planets to satellites and the International Space Station, there’s just so much activity in the sky at night that we can’t see during the day. The only time I don’t like is harsh, mid-afternoon light. My favorite subjects are the colors of the sky when the sun is low for sunrises and sunsets, and particularly the Milky Way at night.

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It’s usually a year or two after I’m done with an image that I can actually see it for the first time. Those are the ones that become my favorite for a little while. When things really click, I think of Psalm 19, from The Complete Jewish Bible:

“The heavens declare the glory of God, the dome of the sky speaks the work of his hands.”

Every day it utters speech, every night it reveals knowledge.”

What about the Maine landscape inspires you?
I was born and grew up in Maine. My grandfather, David Priest, was a trapper and a game warden. My parents took my brother and me camping every summer. From the potato fields of Aroostook County to the rocky coastline to Mt. Katahdin and the woods in between, I love what’s wild about Maine. I rarely venture southwest into more populated areas, as light pollution from cities at night obscures the stars and Milky Way.
What do you do after you set up, while the camera is shooting for hours at a time?
I eat, sleep, read. Catch up on social media if I have cell service. Often I shoot with another friend or two, and I enjoy taking shots of them with a second camera.

Let's get geeky. What kind of gear do you use?
Nikon D700 & D810 DSLRs and a range of lenses from 10.5mm fisheye to 400mm, but my favorite is a Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8 wide angle. I have a Panonex robotic panning head, eMotimo 3-axis motion control on a Dynamic Perception Stage One slider, Promote Control, Ramper Pro, and DslrDash-board on an Android tablet. I use a Goal Zero Sherpa 100 solar battery for power.

Have you had shoots that didn’t work out? When you’re shooting heaven, does hell ever intervene?
Quite frequently! [I’m driven crazy by] dew, frost, rain, clouds, fog, headlights, police, hikers, wildlife, dead batteries, full memory cards, equipment malfunctions, you name it!

What are the challenges of long-exposure?
Everything is more complicated in the dark. You have to operate your equipment more by feel than by sight. It’s easy to drop a cable or lens cap and not realize it or find it. Long shutter speeds are a bigger drain on batteries, particularly when temperatures drop at night, and dew/frost is a frequent nemesis. Headlamps and flashlights can easily ruin a shot.

Have you had any encounters with animals
while shooting?
Oh yes—moose, bear, beaver, deer, partridge. None of them is especially dangerous but can certainly be startling when unexpected. Generally, wildlife is more fearful of you and if you are aware of your surroundings, and don’t show aggression or interfere with their young, they leave you alone.

How many photos are we talking about to create your effects?
At night, most of my spherical panoramas with a fisheye are three to five photos, while some of my gigapixel panoramas with HDR and focus stacking are made up of over 2,000 images. Timelapse also varies, depending on how many hours you shoot, your interval between shots, and how many seconds of video footage you need. Images like that range from 100 photos or so for a stacked image of star trails to 4,000 to 5,000 photos for 360° timelapse movies.

What’s your dream project?
I’ve been working on it for the past decade little by little. I’ve nearly achieved it: a 360° timelapse over a 24-hour period. I’ve also dreamed of shooting a spherical panorama from space. Still working on that.

What is the most unscripted moment or accident that made the most beautiful result?
Occasionally catching a stray headlamp, car headlight, or especially a meteor and having it come out great in the frame. Some things, like meteors, don’t offer a retake.

How does light pollution affect your work, and what lengths do you go to go avoid it?
It affects the night sky greatly in populated areas like cities, and occasionally even in the country with a very bright street lamp or commercial building, if it’s not properly directed. We waste a lot of energy lighting up the sky instead of directing it where we really need it, and interrupt the migration and sleeping patterns of wildlife.

If your favorite sky photo were a symphony, which one would it be?
That’s easy. I actually titled my self-portrait on the lifeguard chair of Sand Beach in Acadia National Park “Milky Way Symphony,” published in Portland Magazine’s 2015 Summerguide. It was taken with the help of some attendees at a workshop, just for fun. This is a photograph I can hear.