



Nature Photography with a Twist

The Pro-Am Tour, photo clubs, private-land photography – more tools for the ranch-revenue toolkit

By MARY O. PARKER

TODD STEELE, FENNESSEY RANCH photography manager (foreground), guides photo club members through an early morning shoot.

A S COLORADO photographer Gordon Illg's Pro-Am Tour team piles into the Tacubaya Ranch's photo blind, someone teases, "Look at y'all, just like one big happy family!" "Oh, yeah, and the more the merrier," jokes South Carolina participant Mark Hoyle, and fellow participant, Houstonite Molly Rose, laughs from behind her lens.

Ranch Wildlife Coordinator Jeffrey Chavez agrees, especially considering that the Pro-Am Tour of Nature Photography marks the ranch's newest addition to its money-making tool-kit. The concept, created by the Texas-based non-profit Images for Conservation Fund (ICF), pairs professional photographers with landowners serious about making money from nature photography.

"We came up with the Pro-Am," says John Martin, ICF's founder, "because we're always looking for ways to make nature photography profitable for landowners."

Nearly an hour away, also in the lower Rio Grande Valley, Montana photographer Michael H. Francis leads his own Pro-Am team on the Santa Clara Ranch, owned by TWA member Dr. Beto Gutierrez.

Both the Santa Clara and the Tacubaya feature blinds and set-ups

professionally planned for great photography. From within the Tamaulipan thornscrub, both Illg and Francis' teams spent nearly four days receiving expert guidance while watching a diverse array of wildlife pass closely by their lenses. And, thanks to the new twist provided by the Pro-Am Tour, they've also enjoyed nightly rounds of competitive excitement.

Chavez pulled up last night's contest results on his laptop. "We had a second place last night," he beams. Like a proud papa, he began sharing the images captured on the ranch since the Pro-Am began on March 4. "Check out the Harris's Hawk that Molly Rose took," he enthuses. "That's really good, isn't it?"

The concept of using nature photography to generate revenue is no longer new, but until recently the focus zoomed in mostly on contests. Ever since the Valley Land Fund held its first competition



Photo by Todd Steele

in 1994, folks have taken note of how well Texas photo contests pay off. In fact, the 2010 Images for Conservation's Pro-Tour of Nature Photography doled out prize money totaling nearly \$200,000, half of which went to landowners.

But now that contests have stimulated demand, landowners consider other ways of dipping into market potential. With urbanization predicted as one of the mega trends for the coming decade, increasing numbers will head to the country for recreational escape. One telling October 2010 statistic released by Intuit notes that half the world's population lives in urban areas, and close to 180,000 move into cities daily.

And while plenty of city folks thank hunting for getting them to the Texas countryside, surprisingly, more of the money hitting our cash registers these days comes from wildlife watching. According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife figures, revenue generated in the Lone Star State in 2006 from wildlife viewing activities actually surpassed hunting revenue by half a billion dollars. Wildlife watching contributed \$5.1 billion to the Texas economy in 2006, while hunting brought in \$4.6 billion. Just five years before, in 2001, those figures were reversed, with hunting bringing the half a billion more.

How much of the "wildlife watching activities" category includes nature photography? An exact figure has yet to be determined, but conservative estimates suggest that the nature photog-



Photo by Todd Steele

PHOTO CLUB MEMBERS on the Fennessey Ranch enjoy an early-morning shoot.



Photo by Jeff Parker

PHOTOGRAPHERS PARTICIPATING in the first ever Pro-Am Tour anticipate the arrival of an array of wildlife at the Rio Pardo blind on the Tacubaya Ranch in south Texas.

raphy industry currently contributes at least \$2 billion a year to national tourism revenue.

With this in mind, when it came time for Tacubaya owner and TWA member Sylvia Chavez to create a new business model for her 3,200-acre portion of the former La Encantada Mexican Land Grant of 1823, she says, "Including nature photography just made sense."

"Our model also includes leasing for cattle and hunting," Chavez adds. "And the way the hunting and the nature photography work out, they don't get in the way of each other. So, why not?"

Jeffrey Chavez, Sylvia's nephew, nods from his seat nearby. "Right now, spring migration is just starting, and hunting is just about over, so there's really very little overlap between the two. And when there is, it's not a problem. And nature photography helps fill in that down time from hunting, and we can use the lodging for both purposes."

As wildlife coordinator, part of Chavez's role is creating a successful nature photography business on the Tacubaya. He admits, "It's been challenging. There have been photographers forever, but educating the public and photographers about private-land photography, well, we still need to create awareness for what we're doing. But, more and more photographers are coming all the time, and they really appreciate it when they find a ranch that's done things right. They're willing to pay for it."

Two-time Images for Conservation Pro-Tour of Nature Photography competitor Todd Steele agrees. Steele sees so much potential that he persuaded Fennessey Ranch owner Brien O'Connor Dunn and Sally Crofutt, General Manager, to dedicate a notable portion of last year's marketing efforts to growing the Coastal Bend ranch's nature photography business.

The results? "In 2010, our fastest growing revenue stream was photography," Crofutt shares. "It was the first time revenue from our other activities combined surpassed hunting."

"But, it wasn't easy," confesses Steele, who now serves as the Fennessey's photography manager, "mostly because the concept of paying somebody to be able to go on their land to photograph is still foreign to many people. But once people try it, they find that the product is superior to what you find on a wildlife refuge or any public land."

Steele says another challenge came in convincing Crofutt and Dunn to let him create a photo club that would give members "the keys to the door. They were afraid of chaos, and I can see that." But, with 26 years of hunt-club experience under his belt, Steele explained the similarities – and the differences – between land open



SOUTH CAROLINA PRO-AM PARTICIPANT Mark Hoyle adjusts a Palo Blanco cutting as he readies the water hole at the Tacubaya's Rio Pardo blind for a great photo shoot.

Photo by Jeff Pankter

to photographers and land open to hunters. "There'd be a different kind of shooting going on," Steele said. Dunn and Crofutt finally acquiesced.

"You pay your annual dues and, basically, that gives you the right to use the photo blinds and the property," Steele says, explaining his concept. "The Fennessey has the infrastructure in place, and club members simply pay for the right to use it. We're the only ones in the country doing this with nature photography."

And, he stresses, with photo blinds already in place, the Fennessey has plenty of other opportunities to generate income through workshops and photo tours offered to members and the general public, alike.

Steele's goal? "I want, no, make that, I *will* make photography

(left) "MOG'S" PHOTO BLIND on the Fennessey Ranch is a popular spot with photo club members eager to capture pictures of migratory songbirds, Rio Grande turkeys and barred owls.

(right) IN PREPARATION for last year's big push toward nature photography, the Fennessey Ranch constructed several photo blinds, each built to house up to six photographers at a time.

Photos by Todd Steele





Photo by Jeff Parker

OWNER OF THE TACUBAYA RANCH and TWA member Sylvia Chavez (l) credits nature photography with providing another source of revenue for her 3,200 acres of family land (formerly part of the historic La Encantada Mexican Land Grant of 1823). The Chavez family (standing, l-r): Sylvia Chavez, Tony Chavez, Bob Chavez, Jeffrey Chavez, Mo Chavez; (seated): Drew Chavez and Isabelle Chavez.

the most valuable asset of the Fennessey within the next five years,” he insists, voice steady with determination.

Martin isn't surprised by Steele's determination or Sylvia Chavez's choice. "The potential for landowners to make money from nature photography is definitely there," he maintains. "When a full marketing program is developed and implemented, an annual income of \$100,000 to \$200,000 is possible from a 500-acre ranch properly developed and marketed. Helping landowners learn how to make that happen is what Images for Conservation is going to focus on next."

That and holding more Pro-Ams. With plenty of ranches wanting in on the action, Images for Conservation has additional events in the works. "We'll be sponsoring other Pro-Am Tours at different places throughout Texas," says Martin.

Within the next 10 years, nature photo tourism is predicted to

become a more prominent part of the tourism industry nationwide, and Martin envisions Texas leading that charge. And, why not? Ultimately, the concept of nature photography is a win-win proposition. It gives landowners another tool for the ranch-revenue toolkit, provides photographers access to wildlife they wouldn't have otherwise, and helps conserve Texas habitat so that it can generate sustainable income in the future.

"Call it sustainability, if you want," quips Crofutt, "but in our business, we call it profitability. Either way, if it helps keep the business going, it's a good idea, and so far, it's looking like nature photography is a *great* idea."

Watching the Pro-Am Tour participants from both Illg and Francis' teams as they gather for tonight's final event, an awards ceremony and celebratory dinner at the Santa Clara, it appears they agree. Even with tripods folded and lenses put away, the fun continues. A sense of camaraderie envelops the small lodge as competitors flip open laptop screens to share images and stories. There's no doubt these photographers will take home plenty of great memories regardless of the Pro-Am's victor.

When time comes to announce the winners, raucous rejoicing, rather than drum rolls, set the stage. Clearing his throat and standing under a poster that reads "A morning at Santa Clara Ranch," Martin announces, "Well, for the first ever Pro-Am Tour, we've got a tie for first place!"

As he declares that Wayne R. Boyd from California and South Carolina's Hoyle will share grand-prize honors, the way laughter bounces off the bright red walls of the homey lodge. It's apparent the two men don't mind sharing the limelight. And, moments later when Martin announces Molly Rose as third place winner, her smile creates a picture worth a thousand words. 🌟



Photo by Jeff Parker

THE PRO-AM TEAM representing Santa Clara Ranch: (l-r) Bob Reynolds, Wayne R. Boyd, Dr. Beto Gutierrez (TWA member and ranch owner), Michael H. Francis (team leader), and Tom Ambrose.

