NEWSLETTER

# MICHAEL CLARK
PHOTOGRAPHY

SPRING 2026

# contents







*Cover Image: An image of Mike Brewer wingsuit skydiving under the Aurora Borealis near Palmer, Alaska on March 23, 2026.*
*Opposite Page: A stand of Larch trees at "Mile Seven Hill" near Biei, Japan on the northern island of Hokkaido.*

# A Whirlwind Start to the Year

*An incredible amount of travel and some very exciting assignments kicked off 2026*

This year has kicked off with a bang—so much so that this is the first Newsletter of the year. I just didn't have time in January to put together the Winter Newsletter. 2026 started off with me flying out to Kennedy Space Center to photograph the rollout of the Artemis II rocket. Then I spent five week traveling in Nepal, Bhutan, India and Japan. Those international trips were photography tours I was co-leading with Andy Biggs and George Nobechi. We had an absolute blast running around and photographing the culture and landscapes in both the high mountains and also in the deep cold up in Hokkaido, as can be seen on the previous page.

After I got back from Japan, I was home for a few weeks before the Red Bull assignment featured here in this issue of the Newsletter—where we photographed wingsuit skydivers under the Aurora Borealis. That was one of the most exciting, nerve-wracking, and stressful assignments I have had in a while. But once we actually got the images, the elation was beyond anything I have had on an assignment in quite some time. You can read all about it—including all the technical details on how we pulled it off starting on page 24.

One week after the Red Bull gig in Alaska, I was off again to Kennedy Space Center in Florida to photograph the launch of Artemis II. As can be seen on the following page, it was an epic daytime launch that happened just one hour before sunset on Cape Canaveral. While there are a few images of the rollout and launch here in this issue of the Newsletter, I will write up a full length feature article for the Summer 2026 issue to share the experience and discuss my camera setup for the launch.

Of course, in addition to the launch it seemed that everyone was following the astronauts as they made their way around the Moon and back. It was an incredible moment and a glimmer of hope in these dark days. To that end, I have written a more in-depth editorial at the end of this issue of the Newsletter detailing the feelings many of us felt while the astronauts were out on their voyage of discovery. So far, 2026 has been quite epic—may it continue. Here's hoping you enjoy this issue and it offers up an escape for an hour or two. Until next time....

*Opposite Page: The Artemis II rocket with four astronauts including Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, Christina Koch, and Jeremy Hansen, launching from LC-39B at Kennedy Space Center on Cape Canaveral on April 1, 2026.*

**Recent Clients:** Red Bull, New Mexico Tourism, New Scientist Magazine, Geo Magazine, 5280 Magazine, Andy Biggs Safaris, Nobechi Creative and the Southern Ute Indian Tribe.

# Michael's work featured on PetaPixel

*PetaPixel features wingsuit skydiving mages from Red Bull assignment in Alaska*

After wrapping up a successful Red Bull assignment photographing the Red Bull Air Force team members Jon DeVore, Jeff Provenzano and Mike Brewer wingsuit skydiving under the Aurora Borealis, the images we created got quite a bit of coverage in various publications. PetaPixel, one of the largest photography blogs in the world, published an article entitled, "Red Bull's Mid-Air Photo Shoot Combines Skydivers and the Aurora Borealis," as shown on the following page. The images from this assignment also ran on Yahoo.com, in Digital Camera World Magazine and of course on RedBull.com.

As PetaPixel is widely considered one of the world's largest and most influential independent photography, videography, and imaging technology publications it was great to see this assignment and the resulting images featured on the website. Kate Garibaldi, who wrote the article, and interviewed me for it, did a fantastic job putting this together. What follows are a few paragraphs from the article.

*For photographer Michael Clark, the dream of photographing wingsuit skydivers beneath the Aurora Borealis was years in the making. Clark, an award-winning freelancer with more than three decades behind the lens, brings a rare combination of artistic vision, athleticism, and technical expertise to his work. In pursuit of a childhood dream to become an astronaut, he earned a B.S. in Physics from the University of Texas at Austin, and that analytical rigor informs every project he tackles.*

*The idea for this stunt originated with Red Bull Air Force team member Jeff Provenzano, who wanted to cap off his last state, Alaska, with a spectacular skydive under the Northern Lights. He approached Clark roughly four years ago to explore whether such a feat could be captured on camera. Provenzano also enlisted Jon DeVore, captain of the Red Bull Air Force and a native Alaskan, to help organize the logistics of the jump. Drawing on his previous aurora photography experience and his problem-solving skills honed through physics, Clark devised a plan to document the unprecedented stunt.*

*"It was originally the idea of Jeff Provenzano. He called me about this project maybe four years ago to see if it was even possible to capture images at night under the aurora. He then called Jon DeVore to check in with him, and after a few days of doing research and drawing from previous experience photographing Auroras elsewhere, I devised a plan for how we could document this project and then we set out to make it happen," Clark says.*

To read the entire article visit PetaPixel. A huge thanks to Red Bull for this incredible assignment and to the entire crew who came together to make it all happen.

PetaPixel

Reviews Guides Learn Podcast Newsletters Sample Galleries Store

# Red Bull's Mid-Air Photo Shoot Combines Skydivers and the Aurora Borealis

MAR 27, 2026 KATE GARIBALDI

Capturing the impossible, photographer Michael Clark documented Red Bull Air Force wingsuit skydivers as they soared beneath the shimmering Aurora Borealis. He shares how months of planning, technical innovation, and high-stakes collaboration culminated in images that make the sky itself look alive.

Jeff Provenzano, Jon DeVore, Amy Chmelecki and Mike Brewer hanging out on the Knik Glacier Lake just before a test wingsuit skydive near Palmer, Alaska on March 23, 2026. Photo by Michael Clark.

Jeff Provenzano and Mike Brewer landing on the Knik Glacier Lake after a test wingsuit skydive near Palmer, Alaska on March 23, 2026. Photo by Michael Clark.

## The Dream Team's Dream

For photographer Michael Clark, the dream of photographing wingsuit skydivers beneath the Aurora Borealis was years in the making. Clark, an award-winning freelancer with more than three decades behind the lens, brings a rare combination of artistic vision, athleticism, and technical expertise to his work. In pursuit of a childhood dream to become an astronaut, he earned a B.S. in Physics from the University of Texas at Austin, and that analytical rigor informs every project he tackles.

The idea for this stunt originated with Red Bull Air Force team member Jeff Provenzano, who wanted to cap off his last state, Alaska, with a spectacular skydive under the Northern Lights. He approached Clark roughly four years ago to explore whether such a feat could be captured on camera. Provenzano also enlisted Jon DeVore, captain of the Red Bull Air Force and a native Alaskan, to help organize the logistics of the jump. Drawing on his previous aurora photography experience and his problem-solving skills honed through physics, Clark devised a plan to document the unprecedented stunt.

# Photography Workshops

*An overview of workshops and online classes with Michael Clark*

Each year I teach a few workshops on a variety of topics including adventure sports photography, landscape photography, digital workflow and artificial lighting. Below is a listing of the in-person and online workshops I will be teaching in 2026 and 2027. For more information on these workshops, and to find out how to register, go to the Workshops page on my blog or click on the links in the descriptions below.

**ONE-ON-ONE WORKSHOPS**

*In-Person or Online via Zoom*

*Email info@michaelclarkphoto.com to Schedule*

In addition to my in-person group workshops listed here I also teach one-on-one workshops both in-person or virtually via Zoom. In the past photographers have come to Santa Fe, New Mexico for one-on one workshops custom designed for exactly what they want to learn—these have been one day to three day private workshops. Alternatively, I have also done one-on-one private workshops in other locations as well—chosen by the photographer to meet their needs. These custom workshops are a great way to dial in your photography because we can cover way more ground specific to your needs and in a shorter time-frame than we can in a group workshop. Prices start at $900/half day and $1,400 per full day. Half days are five hours or less and full days are eight to ten hours.

If you would like to set up a one-on-one Skype or Zoom session to discuss any photography related topics please contact me. From portfolio reviews to digital workflow, lighting techniques and career development and anything in between we can set up a session and cover whatever you want. If you have any questions about these sessions please don't hesitate to reach out. I have found that we can cover a wide variety of topics in these one-on-one sessions. Pricing for online sessions starts at $150/hour and discounts apply for multiple hour sessions.

**CUTTING-EDGE LIGHTING TECHNIQUES**

*Maine Media Workshops - Maine, USA*

*June 22 - 26, 2026*

How do you separate your work from the pack? Do you want to break down the barriers that are keeping your photography from standing out? In the last decade, flash manufacturers have added some incredible technology to their latest strobes. Michael has been working with these new flash technologies for over fifteen years and has even helped a few companies perfect the technology. High-Speed Sync and Hi-Sync (HS) allow us to freeze action like never before, light subjects from ridiculous distances, and easily create lit portraits with incredibly shallow depth of field. In short, we can create images that were never possible before.

*This summer I will again be teaching for the Maine Media Workshops up in Rockport, Maine. We have set up a very exciting workshop exploring Cutting-Edge Lighting Techniques as shown above. Pre-Covid this was one of my most popular workshops and I am very excited to bring it back. I am also very happy to announce that this workshop is also sponsored by Elinchrom and MAC Group, who will be providing the lighting gear for us to use in this workshop.*

Designed for intermediate to experienced photographers, this 5-day workshop concentrates on creating unique images using cutting-edge lighting technology. Working with elite athletes, dancers, and models both in the studio and out on location, we aim to create images that are not easy to duplicate. Topics covered during the week include high-speed sync flash techniques, multiple exposure flash techniques, freezing motion, stroboscopic lighting, advanced portrait lighting, motion blur and rear curtain strobe techniques, and mixing continuous lighting with strobes.

Classroom time includes daily editing, group critiques, and one-on-one meetings with Michael. In addition, Michael shares his insights and experiences in the photo industry, including career development, portfolios, and how to shoot for editorial and commercial clients.

This workshops is sponsored by MAC Group and Elinchrom. MAC Group will be supplying the workshop with Elinchrom FIVE strobes, which are 500 W/s battery-powered strobes as well as a variety of lighting modifiers and transmitters. This workshop would not be

possible without the support of Elinchrom and MAC Group so a huge thanks to them for their support. This was one of the most popular and creative workshops I put on each year pre-Covid so I am very excited to bring it back and help more photographers push their own work forward.

Workshop Fee: $1,995 USD

To register for this incredible photography workshop visit the Maine Media Workshops website.

**RAFTING THE GRAND CANYON**

*Visionary WILD - Grand Canyon National Park, USA*
*April 25 - May 8, 2027*

This trip will be led by master landscape photographer Justin Black and top adventure photographer Michael Clark, both veteran Grand Canyon river runners. The planned itinerary absolutely maximizes the photographic potential and overall quality of experience to be had during twelve days on the Colorado River in the mile-deep Grand Canyon.

Applying our experience of our prior Grand Canyon raft trips, and in collaboration with our hand-picked boat crew from Arizona Raft Adventures (AZRA), we've developed an itinerary that takes advantage of favorable spring conditions and sets us up for the best landings for photo excursions and camps along the river. Detailed planning and the expert skill of experienced boat crews we've worked with before are critical, because there's no going back upstream on the Colorado River.

Our itinerary starts in Flagstaff, Arizona, at the Little America Hotel. The day before our departure for the river, we will convene to get to know each other (and catch up with returning friends), and Justin and Michael will make a presentation to get your creative juices flowing and prepare you for photography in the Canyon. This will be followed by an orientation by AZRA staff to go over the game plan, safety, answer questions, and distribute dry bags for packing your personal gear. We'll set off early the following morning for Lee's Ferry, where our raft and crew will be waiting for us at our launch point.

A little about the rafts: We will travel aboard two 32-foot-long motorized rafts built around a strong aluminum frame with a below-deck cargo hold for important items that tolerate getting wet, like camp chairs and cans of beer. Personal gear and camera bags will be stored in dry-bags strapped down on the deck above the waterline. A crew of two expert AZRA guides will crew each raft, equipped with a quiet four-stroke Honda motor for steering purposes. The motor is shut off as we drift with the current down the river in stretches of calm water. We will be running a great deal of whitewater, and where you sit in the raft and how you dress will determine whether you get soaked or stay dry (or dryish). In the mid-afternoon sun, getting soaked by a big splash is a great way to cool off. What are the chances of taking an unexpected swim in the river? Slim to none, if you follow your guides' instructions. On our many prior raft trips using AZRA's large, stable motor rafts and their immensely experienced boat crews, we have never flipped a boat, only one participant has ever gone for an unintentional swim, and he wasn't following orders to hold on in a rapid.

Once on the Colorado River, we quickly enter Marble Canyon and from there the canyon rim towers higher and

*I am very excited to go back to the Grand Canyon with Justin Black and Visionary WILD in 2027. This trip will be an amazing adventure packed full of incredible photography opportunities. In my experience as a former backpacking guide in the Canyon, rafting it instead of hiking it is the way to go. Each night we will have a very comfortable camp and excellent food—and we will be able to explore various parts of the canyon that are very difficult to reach except from river level.*

higher as we pass through ever more ancient rock strata. From the raft, we'll take in the stunning mesas and rock formations all around us, watch bighorn sheep just a few meters away at the water's edge, marvel at condors soaring and ravens playing overhead, and watch the light and shade play across the water and reflect in hues of gold and red on the canyon walls. Landings at some of our favorite side canyons, waterfalls, and rock formations along the way will provide the opportunity to stretch our legs and explore Grand Canyon's intimate landscapes. Each afternoon, we'll pull into riverside beaches, which will serve as our camps. These are selected in advance for group comfort and excellent photo opportunities close to camp in the evening, and to position us strategically to target the next morning's photography location.

As we arrive in camp each afternoon, we'll form a "bag line" as a team to unload personal gear and camp equipment from the raft to the beach. This group bonding experience is not to be underestimated. After that, we each locate a nice personal piece of Colorado River beach to put down our tarp, comfy sleeping pad, pillow, sheet, and

sleeping bag (all provided, as are tents, though few seem to bother with tents after a night or two). Then, while the boat crew prepares a fabulous and well-deserved dinner, we'll photograph in the evening light. We'll gather the camp chairs in a circle to chat over a beer or glass of wine, have a rinse in the river, or just relax and enjoy the peace, solitude, and crystal-clear night skies.

When our time on the river comes to an end, it will be too soon. Back at the hotel in Flagstaff, after a proper shower and calls to loved ones to confirm that we've reemerged into civilization, we'll meet for a final celebratory dinner with our boat crews at one of Flagstaff's finer restaurants. After breakfast the next morning, we'll meet for a classroom session to edit and project images for review. Wrapping up by mid-afternoon, we'll say "until we meet again," and our merry band will part company with hard drives full of amazing images, heads full of incredible memories, spirits uplifted by the experience, and hearts just a little bit sad that our adventure had reached its conclusion. We hope you'll join us for this trip of a lifetime!

Workshop Costs: $10,595 to $10,995 depending on lodging.

For all the details and logistics and to register for this adventure visit the Visionary Wild website.

**KENYA SAMBURULAND MASTERCLASS**

*Andy Biggs Safaris - Kenya*
*October 15 - 25, 2027*

In October 2027 we have a very unique safari experience lined up, which will be a cultural photography trip to northern Kenya and home to the Samburu. This trip combines a heavy dose of instruction, as well as setting up photographic scenarios. The Samburu are a beautiful semi nomadic tribe, similar to the Masai, who live in some of the most beautiful and remote landscapes on the African continent. We will split our time between two different camps, which are remote, yet authentically luxurious in a timeless way. Our days will be filled with cultural immersion, taking photographs as bystanders, as well as inviting those we meet along the way to do some formal sit-down portraits in any place that is photographically rich. One day it may be on top of a hill at sunset and another day it may be an impromptu backdrop at camp and we have Samburu warriors drop by to have their portraits taken with natural or artificial light. The goal is to have a great time and to have unique moments with new friends that we meet along the way. And of course going home with photographs that go alongside these wonderful memories. This is a once in a lifetime experience. This trip is visiting areas that we know well and have experience working in.

Guest instructor Michael Clark will be joining us, making this a teaching workshop for those who want to learn flash photography. We are bringing along studio lighting equipment, so you only need to bring your cameras and lenses. We will be teaching studio lighting for two days at the beginning of the trip, so show up and learn in a controlled environment before we head into the field.

The cost of this all-inclusive safari is $15,950 per person. This fee includes all in-country ground and air transportation as well as hotel accommodation (double occupancy) and all meals. Due to the limited number of spaces available, if a solo guest is willing to share a room and we can match with another guest of the same gender, we will

*This Kenyan portrait masterclass will be a very unique safari experience in northern Kenya. The image above, crafted by Andy Biggs, shows just one example of the possible portrait images we can create with the incredible Samburu tribe. We will be bringing battery-powered strobes to create a wide variety of portraits of the tribe and to further our understanding of portraiture in general.*

do so. If a solo guest is unwilling to share, then a single supplement will be charged $1,800 (please contact us if you would like to have your own accommodation as we have a very limited number of single slots available).

For the full details or to register for this exciting adventure please visit Andy Biggs website.

## Workshop Testimonials

"Michael certainly knows his stuff. From Capture to Print: The Complete Digital Photographer's Workflow is delivered in an easy to follow and comprehensive manner that covers many things that you may not expect – such as how to choose proper lighting to view and evaluate your prints or what color shirt to wear when you're correcting images. I really appreciated that this is a pro workflow course delivered by a pro photographer. Michael is also a superb teacher, a superb communicator, who is welcoming and inviting of questions from all his participants. I took this workshop in June of 2020, using Zoom software. I was really amazed by how Michael made it seem

like he's been doing these workshops forever this way! It was a great pleasure being part of this workshop with so many other amazing photographers. I learned much which is valuable to me and enjoyed doing so at the same time. And just to reiterate, as to the workshop: I'm impressed." – Stephen Starkman, Toronto

"Michael is the best instructor I have taken a workshop from." - Participant, Cutting-Edge Lighting Workshop

"Michael set an incredibly high bar for his workshop. He gave 110%, covered a broad range of topics and did an outstanding job." - Chris Council, Adventure Photography Workshop

"Within the short time I've been studying and practicing photography, I have had teachers who are good educators, but not great photographers, and vice versa, but few who are both. Count yourself in these narrow ranks. I went through four years of college and several careers getting less candid advice and encouragement than I got in four days with you. For what it is worth, thank you for that." – Brandon McMahon, Adventure Photography Workshop

"My mind is still spinning and I can't help but smile every time I think of the wonderful experience garnered from our workshop. Between what I learned from the two of you, as well as from my talented classmates – this was a great experience, and I would do it again." – Participant in the 2008 Balloon Fiesta workshop taught by Andy Biggs and I.

"The Adobe Lightroom Intensive Workshop in Seattle was excellent. The two-day format was perfect–just enough time to cover all the important features but not so much time as to be draining or get in the way of work. Michael Clark was an outstanding instructor. Not only was he clear, concise, and comprehensive, but his manner was friendly and equable. The fact that he is also a working professional photographer made the instruction all the more relevant. I have used previous versions of Lightroom, but it had been a while and I had recently upgraded. I was able to review some things I knew, learn about new features, and change my perspective on some workflow steps. An absolutely great workshop that I recommend wholeheartedly." – Karen Huntt, Lightroom Workshop, Spring 2011

"Priceless chance to learn from the absolute best. Every photographer should take this class!" - Jill Sanders

"Just wanted you know how much fun I had during the workshop last weekend! I learned a lot and look forward to doing other workshops with you." – Jason Quevedo, Philadelphia Mentor Series Trek

"Your workshop at Santa Fe was too good and I came away with a lot of knowledge and renewed energy. The level of expertise that you and Michael shared was top-notch and I hope to repeat this experience again. Thanks for such a great workshop!" – Participant in the Balloon Fiesta workshop taught by Andy Biggs and myself.

For more information on my upcoming workshops please visit the Workshops page on my blog. For any questions regarding my upcoming workshops please email me. If you would like to sign up for a private workshop please contact me and we can figure out a time and location that works for your needs.

# The Search for the Perfect Photo Backpack

*An in-depth look at a variety of photography backpacks and issues I have with all of them*

As someone who owns a ridiculous number of backpacks, at current count I have eighteen or more backpacks, I consider myself somewhat of a backpack expert. I have owned and worked with more than fifty different backpacks in the last three decades. Not all of them were for photography specifically—most were for climbing or backpacking. I have owned probably a dozen or more photo backpacks from companies like Lowepro, f-stop, PGYTECH, Think Tank, Peak Design, Shimoda and others. I was sponsored by Lowepro for a few decades and gave them in-depth feedback for a while on how to build what I thought would be the perfect photo backpack. In the last decade I have been sponsored to some degree by f-stop, who were the originators of the back-panel camera access design. Having been around for so long, I have a long list of critiques when it comes to photo backpacks. Sadly, to this day, there are no "perfect" photo backpacks on the market. Here in this article, I am not really giving a review of any specific backpack but aim to call out the ones that have worked well for me and discuss some of the problems all of them generally share.

At the start of my photography career (and even before that), I used to work in an outdoor store and was trained to fit large backpacking and mountaineering packs from a variety of different brand managers. Every few months

companies like Gregory Packs, Dana Designs, Osprey and Arc'teryx would send out reps to train us employees on sizing and tailoring backpacks for customers. It was basically like getting a custom shoe fitting session to dial in a backpack so that it was as comfortable as possible. We would size up and dial in the packs, then load up them up with forty-to-fifty pounds (18-23 kg) of sandbags and then let the customer walk with each pack for a while to determine which one they liked the best.


Image by Jacob Kupferman

Also, having been a climbing and adventure photographer for the last three decades I have carried my fair share of extremely heavy backpacks—up to 120 pounds (55 Kg) or more. I have even carried people out of the wilderness with them loaded in my giant Dana Designs Astralplane (long since discontinued) back when I was a climbing and backpacking guide. When I photograph rock climbing where you need to take roughly sixty pounds (27 Kg) of climbing gear plus some camera gear on top of that I always take a larger backpacking-style back pack like my Arc'teryx Arrakkis 55 (shown above) or an even bigger backpack. I still have my old Dana Designs Astralplane, which has a volume of 7,500 cubic inches or around 125 liters—it is massive. I pack all of the ropes and climbing gear into the pack and then add the camera gear—usually packed into individual camera cases—on top of that. Because the amount of gear in this scenario is so heavy the backpack needs to have an incredible suspension system to transfer that weight to the hips. These days I try to avoid carrying packs over 65 pounds but sometimes that isn't possible—as when photographing rock climbing.

For most of my assignments these days, I am not really ever backpacking—or carrying camping gear and a huge amount of camera gear in one pack. Hence, for my needs, I just need a pack that can carry a fair bit of camera gear into the location along with an extra jacket, a few snacks and some water. This is where the photo backpack has become my mainstay camera bag. In the last decade I have mostly been using the f-stop Tilopa and the f-stop Anja camera bags as my main photo backpacks. The Tilopa is a 50 liter backpack (shown on the previous page on the far left in black) and the Anja is a 37 liter backpack (shown on the previous page in the center). I have had multiple versions of both of these f-stop backpacks—as I have worn out two or three of them and had to replace them. Before I got in with f-stop, I was sponsored by Lowepro for a long time and had some of their photo backpacks. I used the

*Above you can see me carrying my f-stop Tilopa pack on a photo shoot in the Southern Alps of New Zealand with Mt. Cook (a.k.a. Aoraki) in the center of the image. I hiked up a few thousand feet to arrive at this vantage point and carried around thirty-five-pounds (16 kg) of camera gear with me. In addition to the camera gear I had extra clothing, food, water and various other camera bits (like cleaning cloths, extra batteries, etc.) loaded into the Tilopa backpack.*

Lowepro Whistler 350 AW for a long time and it was an excellent photo backpack but not quite as versatile as the f-stop or Shimoda options. Lately, I have purchased the PGYTECH OnePro Flex 50 liter photo backpack (shown on Page 16 on the far right), which promised to have a better suspension system that would carry heavy loads more comfortably.

Most, if not all, photo backpacks are fairly similar these days. Some might have a larger capacity or a fancier suspension system but they all for the most part have a rear entry of some sort and use an interchangeable internal camera cube (called an ICU) to store the camera gear. Basically, most of the various photo backpacks I have mentioned are copies of the original f-stop camera bags from back in 2006. My main gripe with all of these photo backpacks is that almost all of them have flat back panels. When you load them up with forty pounds of photo gear, which isn't that hard to do, they feel like you are carrying a brick on your back. What the backpacking and climbing pack companies understand is that we humans have curved backs. Hence, they (Osprey, Arc'Teryx, Gregory, etc.) make packs that have a curved line of padding that molds and fits to your back so they can comfortably carry any amount of weight you are willing to heft. That S-curve is difficult to adapt to the photo backpack, but

*Above you can see a few different images showing off the PGYTECH OnePro Flex backpack. On the left is an image showing how the rear back panel opens to gain access to your camera gear. Note that you can choose from a wide variety of excellent ICU camera cases to put into the OnePro Flex backpack. I really love how solid and beautifully built the PGYTECH ICUs are. On the right you can see a marketing image from PGYTECH showing the aluminum frame that is built into the backpack. It seems like it would be the perfect photo backpack but in use this curved aluminum stay does nothing to form the pack to your back because the mesh back panel does not have enough padding built into it to actually make an S-curve like you would think it would. Instead it instantly reverts to an inverse curve.*

not impossible. The other critical issue with most photo backpacks is that the built-in waist belts are woefully inadequate and don't fit or flex the way they need to so that the weight is transferred to the hips—and having that weight transferred to the hips is critical for heavy packs.

The other thing that few if any camera backpack manufacturers have tried to solve is making packs that fit a variety of back lengths. I am a tall dude at 6'3" (190 cm). My back length is 22-inches (56 cm) and basically no one makes a photo backpack long enough for my back length. It is not enough to just have an adjustable ladder system to change the placement of the shoulder straps (as a few companies have). Ideally the packs would come in different back lengths (at least three different size ranges) and also have some adjustment for the shoulder straps just as climbing and backpacking packs all have.

The PGYTECH OnePro Flex backpack that I bought last year was one of the very few on the market that tried to create a more comfortable s-curve type back panel (as shown above) using a combination of mesh and some padding—in a similar style as many of the current Osprey backpacks. Sadly, they missed the mark because they didn't add enough padding behind the lower lumbar support. It seems they built the pack with the assumption that you would have the waist belt riding above your hip bones, which is a major miscalculation as that doesn't transfer the weight to your hips where you want it and instead just cinches down uncomfortably on your stomach. With the waist belt on your hips, where it should be, the mesh back panel actually creates an inverted curve that is even more uncomfortable than the flat panel photo backpacks. I have figured out a way to fix this problem by stuffing a rolled up Gore-Tex shell behind the lumbar pad but this is not a perfect solution. I am quite shocked that they thought of so many extras on this backpack but botched the suspension. It seems as if no one in the design phase thought to put some weight into the pack and try it on. I will say they did create a comfortable waist belt

*Above are two other photo backpacks, with perhaps better suspension systems than any of my current photo backpacks. On the left, there are two images of the Atlas Adventure Camera Pack (pictured here in Gray) and on the right are two images of the LowePro PhotoSport Pro III 55L. I am showing here both images of the front of the packs as well as the back panel so you can see the curved nature of these suspension systems, which look much more like backpacking packs than the normal photo backpacks. I have not used either of these so I do not know for sure how comfortable they are. Both are a bit larger than I actually need.*

that does transfer the weight to your hips fairly well once you add some extra bulk behind the mesh backpanel. Kudos to PGYTECH for at least working out that common issue on photo backpacks.

Aside from the back panel issues on the PGYTECH OnePro Flex backpack, it is a very well designed camera pack. The entire back panel flips open when you need to get into the camera gear (as shown on the previous page) and I love their svelte camera inserts, which are quite a bit nicer than my f-stop ICU camera cubes. I have to say though that after using the PGYTECH and a few other photo backpacks where the entire back panel unzips, this rear-entry style is a bit more cumbersome and slower to open up compared to the f-stop design. With the f-stop packs the large zippers they use are so fast and easy to zip open that every other design seems slow and tedious. The back panel zipper on the PGYTECH OnePro Flex backpack is also a waterproof zipper since it follows the edges of the pack. Because it is a waterproof zipper those are usually stiffer and have more friction when you pull the zipper—as is the case with the PGYTECH pack. The f-stop pack on the other hand doesn't use a waterproof zipper but just a large, beefy zipper that is much easier to open.

The only other issue I have with the larger packs mentioned here (the PGYTECH OnePro Flex backpack and the f-stop Tilopa) is that they are a bit too thick and don't fit into the smaller regional jet overhead bins easily when fully packed up. I have actually gotten both into those smaller regional jet bins but it was a struggle and some airline stewards might force me to check them if it takes me too long to jam the backpack in there. Hence, I have to carefully plan some trips to avoid those regional jets if I am taking the larger backpacks—or alternatively I have to take one of my smaller f-stop backpacks.

There are a few companies who have thought about the need for a curved back panel on their photo backpacks including Atlas (with their Adventure backpack) and Lowepro (with their Photosport backpacks)—both of which are shown above. Both of these options are larger sized photo backpacks—larger than I need for my normal

assignments. To be clear, I have not tried out either of these packs (the Atlas or the Lowepro) so I cannot comment on how comfortable they are. But, they do seem to address many of the issues I have with most other adventure-style backpacks. If any of my readers have one of these packs let me know what you think. I am tempted to buy one of the Atlas packs but I have so many photo backpacks already it seems ridiculous to buy another $500 backpack. As I have already said, if I need to carry a heavy load then I typically reach for one of my backpacking or climbing backpacks that can comfortably carry up to 80 or 90 pounds (36 to 41 Kg).

The search for the perfect photo backpack has been never-ending. I still have not found it. But, I have been using my f-stop backpacks for years now and they have worked quite well. If I know I have to hike in a fair ways, I will usually opt for a smaller climbing daypack or medium sized climbing pack and will just pack my camera gear into it. Those medium sized climbing packs will certainly carry better than most if not all of my photo backpacks. With my f-stop Tilopa, I often have 45-pounds of camera gear in the pack, and that can torture the back fairly well if I have to carry it any significant distance. I will say that the perfect size photo backpack (at least when I don't need to carry an insane amount of camera gear) is the f-stop Anja 37-liter pack. The Anja has been an absolute workhorse backpack for me—especially when I have to fly on the smaller regional jets. Even fully packed the Anja slides into those smaller overhead bins with ease (to the surprise of many Airline stewards).

*"If anyone from one of the big outdoor companies that creates backpacking and climbing backpacks wants to collaborate and make the perfect camera backpack please get in touch."*

Over the last few decades, I have spoken with many different pack designers about a new photo backpack design. I had a two-hour discussion about this with a top Lowepro designer many years ago and they put some of what I suggested into a pack way back in 2008, but it was a cheaply made pack that I never loved. I have since had many discussions with f-stop, Shimoda and others about updating the back panel to work with humans but amazingly none of them seemed interesting in changing their current designs. I even reached out to Arc'teryx, my favorite outdoor gear company, and asked if they would design a photo backpack. They said it would cost a fortune and no one would buy it. If only I could take an Arc'teryx Arrakis 45 (a pack they stopped making well over a decade ago) and put a zipper in the back panel that would likely be the best photo backpack ever made.

I have tried the Shimoda packs, which many seem to love. I was actually one of the first brand ambassadors for them and received two Shimoda packs as part of that arrangement. When I got the packs, I spent a few hours trying to figure how to fit my Nikon camera gear into the Shimoda ICUs and was incredibly frustrated. I could not find anyway to fit my larger Nikon camera bodies into those ICUs no matter how I tried. The ICUs were designed for the smaller Sony style mirrorless cameras and

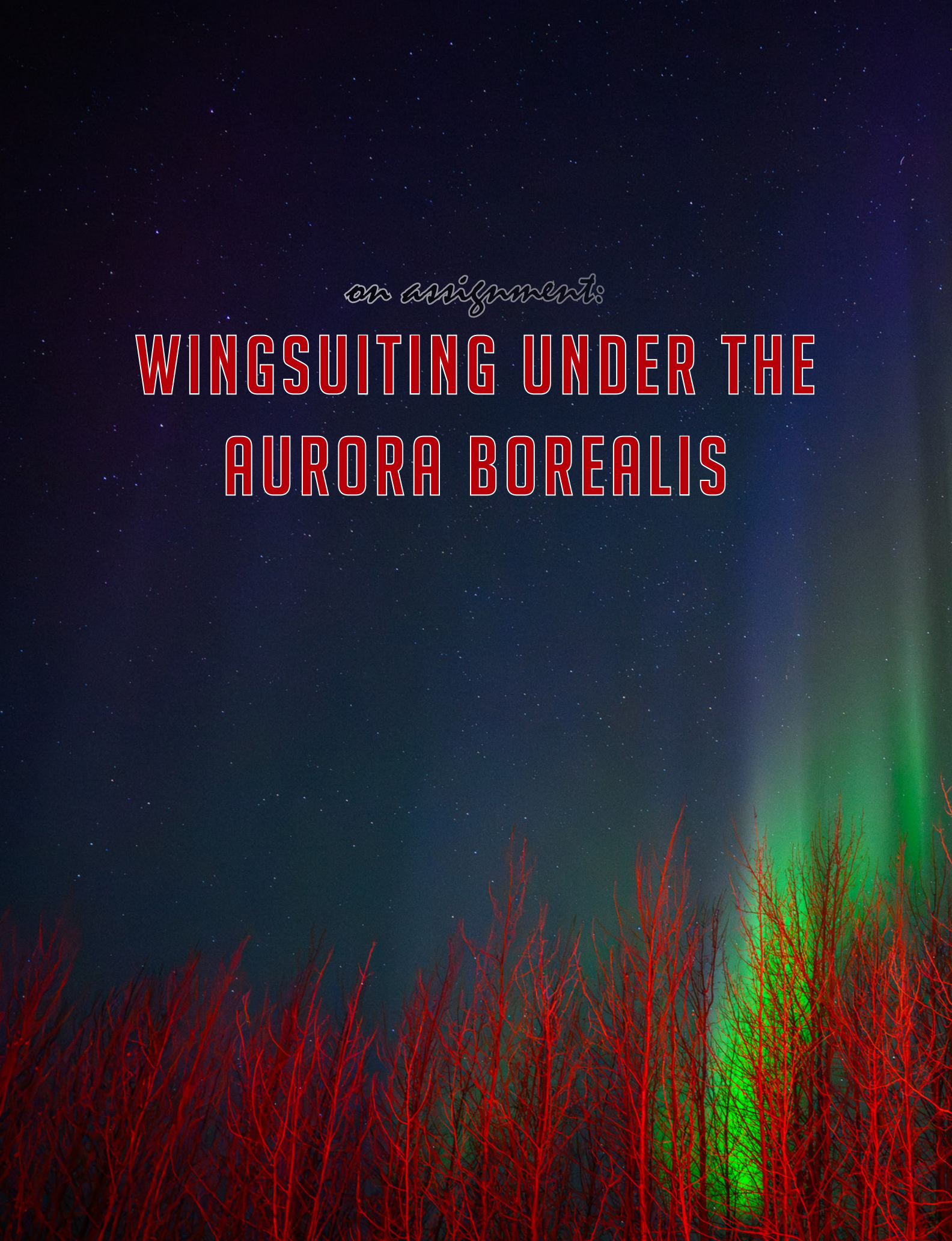
did not seem to work for most other camera brands. I also did not like having the rear access panel zip open to the side. This Shimoda design puts part of the zipper on the bottom of the pack, which can rub on your lumbar region and cause blisters in warm climates. That to me seemed like a major design flaw. The Shimoda packs were beautifully built and looked amazing but these small design quirks meant it just wouldn't work for my gear. I failed to see how it was any better than the f-stop packs I was already using so I sent them back.

I have also tried the Peak Design adventure backpack and that is a swing and a miss for me. I can see what they were going for—a pack for those that only take a very small amount of lightweight camera gear. For those that don't need to take two or three camera bodies and five lenses then perhaps the Peak Design outdoor pack can work for you. It is basically a sack with straps on it and no suspension to speak of. While it looks gorgeous, like all of their products, it isn't a pack I would consider—and I have a lot of their products that I use fairly often.

While I would love to use a rolling camera bag, they just don't work for me since I almost always have to carry my gear into backcountry locations where a roller camera bag would be useless. I often envy those photographers that live in big cities and never have to fly on regional jets with their large camera roller bags, but that is a different world than mine. I have often flirted with getting something like the Peak Design Roller Pro carry-on bag and dropping one of my f-stop or PGYTECH ICUs into that roller for air travel. But with that roller, I would also have to pack a backpack in my checked luggage for use once I arrived since the roller would then become nearly useless for my normal assignments—but I haven't pulled the trigger on that system. On many assignments I have so much gear that I am counting the ounces right up to the airline weight limits so having to pack an extra backpack might not be ideal. And with a roller bag made for larger carry-on bins it would be painful to have to pull out the ICU and check the roller bag on smaller regional jets.

If anyone from one of the big outdoor companies that creates backpacking and climbing backpacks wants to collaborate and make the world's most perfect camera backpack please get in touch. I would be more than happy to give the blueprints of a stellar camera backpack to any manufacturer willing to listen. I think most photographers would be happy to pay a high price (I know I would) for a camera backpack that actually is comfortable and works very well for our needs. I realize that my needs are fairly specific as an adventure photographer—and that perhaps I carry a fair bit more camera gear than your average photographer, but I know a lot of photographers that have spent thousands on camera bags.

I imagine many of you, if you made it this far, are wondering, "What's the big deal? All of the packs you have mentioned work just fine." I am guessing most photographers don't load up a photo backpack with 45 pounds (20 Kg) of gear and walk ten miles with it. If you have, then you know very well what I am talking about here. I have also had back issues for decades now (as many photographers do) because of cycling accidents, carrying way too much weight and wear and tear on the body. Hence, having a comfortable, well thought out backpack that fits my body is something I think about way more than I should have to think about. I am honestly shocked that no one has really created a photo backpack that is as comfortable as your average Osprey or Arc'teryx backpack.


on assignment:
WINGSUITING UNDER THE AURORA BOREALIS

Every once in a while an assignment comes together with electricity buzzing through the entire crew—the athletes, photographers, cinematographers, producers, athlete managers and the entire crew see the magic of the moment and realize that the sum is greater than the whole. My latest assignment with Red Bull and the Red Bull Air Force skydivers was one of those rare gigs where everything magically came together. For this assignment we were tasked with documenting Jeff Provenzano, Jon Devore and Mike Brewer as they wingsuit skydived under the Aurora Borealis, otherwise known as the Northern Lights, up near Palmer, Alaska.

This project has been in the works for a long time. Jeff Provenzano called me three years ago with the seed for this idea. He wanted to finish his last skydive in all fifty states and Alaska was the last one on the list. His idea was to skydive under the Aurora Borealis, which meant a skydive in winter in Alaska—at night. He came to me to help figure out the technicalities of capturing that scenario. After a few days of thinking about it, I got back to Jeff and told him how I thought we could document it with still photography. His next call was to Jon DeVore, the captain of the Red Bull Air Force skydive team. Jon helped figure out the logistical aspects of pulling it off and building the team to do it. Ever since that first call with Jeff, I have been scheming on how we could capture the images. Hence, this has been a collaboration from the start.

In the last few years we have had plane tickets, lodging, rental cars and everything booked on a few different occasions only to have it canceled the night before we were supposed to fly up to Alaska. In each case, the weather changed suddenly or the Aurora forecast fizzled out and the trip was canceled. Red Bull spent a serious amount of money just paying for canceled flights, hotels, and rental cars over the last few years. When I got the call from Jon DeVore in mid-March that we were going to head up a few days later and give it a go I was somewhat in disbelief. On the flight up to Alaska the cloud cover looked dodgy and the Aurora forecast wasn't as solid as we would have hoped for, but as can be seen in the image on the following page with the Northern Lights ablaze in the sky it miraculously all came together and we had northern lights for three nights in a row.

In my work over the last sixteen years or so with the Red Bull Air Force I have asked various team members to fly remote cameras and create images because I cannot physically do what they do and because I am not a skydiver. Even if I was a skydiver, I still couldn't do what these athletes do—even if I had been skydiving at a high level for the last ten years. It is a true collaboration between photographer and skydivers who take my input and mix it with their skydiving skills and their own photographic intuition, and with the team we come together to create something wild and unique.

For this assignment, there were two methods I dreamed up for documenting this historic flight—as no one had ever (as far as we know) skydived below the Aurora Borealis. As usual in adventure photography, the best images are almost always those created closest to the subject. Hence, my first plan was to have a remote camera mounted on the helmet of a third wingsuit skydiver who would jump with Jeff and Jon. As for the technical aspects of this, the idea was that Mike Brewer would fly the camera and literally create the images by biting down on a "tongue switch" connect to the camera and running into his helmet. The Idea was that Mike, Jon and Jeff would fly


*Above is my Nikon Z6 prepped for mounting onto Mike Brewer's helmet for the air-to-air images. The camera is shown here with a SmallRig cage. The cage allowed us to mount the Z6 vertically on the helmet so we could get a horizontal image. Before we finalized the setup on Mike's helmet, we removed the cage to lighten the camera and I also wrapped the flash and camera in a lot of gaffer's tape just to make sure the flash—which was mostly plastic—wouldn't break off in flight.*

together with Jon and Jeff formed up next to each other with the Aurora streaming down above them. In terms of the camera settings, the camera was set for a long exposure to let in enough light to show the Aurora Borealis, and then I found a very small flash, which would be mounted on top of the camera. That flash would go off at the end of the exposure to illuminate Jon and Jeff and also freeze their motion (because of the very short, fast flash duration). In my mind, there was always going to be a bit of motion blur in the image. Because the sky divers were flying at terminal velocity (approximately 120 mph) the Aurora would be slightly blurred and the skydivers motion would also be blurred because they can't stay perfectly 100% in line as the one-second exposure plays out. This first idea seemed easy to pull off and I had high confidence that we could get this set of images.

As shown above, the camera I chose to use for the air-to-air images was my trusty old Nikon Z6 and a Nikkor Z 20mm f/1.8 lens. The original Z6 came out in 2018 and I have used it on several nighttime assignments—most notably with the Marine Special Forces (aka MARSOC) where we photographed them by moonlight on a mock mission each night for six days in a row. The resulting images from that MARSOC assignment showed me that the Z6 is an exceptional camera in low light and at high ISO settings. Hence, it would be an ideal camera for this project and the fact that it was also one of the smallest and lightest weight cameras I owned was a bonus for Mike Brewer, who would be flying the camera. A few years ago, I purchased a used Nikon SB-400 speedlight specifically for this project, which would also be mounted on the Z6. The SB-400 is the smallest Nikon speedlight


RedBull
RedBull

that I could find and it hasn't been manufactured since the early 2010s. Luckily, Nikon still has exceptional TTL speedlight functionality even with its newest mirrorless camera offerings. That SB-400 was the key to these air-to-air images. In the images of the Nikon Z6 camera rig shown on page 28, I also have a SmallRig cage mounted on the camera, which we decided to take off to save weight when we mounted this rig on top of Mike Brewer's helmet. I also used a liberal amount of gaffer's tape on the flash and the camera body to make sure the flash—which had a fairly cheap, plastic body—didn't fly off mid-flight with all of the air pressure at 120 mph.

The second plan was similar but perhaps even more complex to pull off. As the photographer on the ground, I would try to capture the skydivers as they came in for a landing under canopy. The Red Bull Air Force doesn't just plop down when they land, they are using smaller parachutes and typically come in at sixty-to-eighty miles per hour swooping over the landing for a hundred feet or more before skidding to a stop. For this image, I would put my camera on a tripod, use a long exposure for the Aurora and then use a powerful flash to again freeze the motion of the skydivers and illuminate them against the green skies above. The trick with this was timing the image so I didn't clip off the beginning of the swoop or the skydiver at the end of the exposure. Having to use a long one-to-two second exposure made it very tricky to initiate the exposure at just the right moment so that the skydiver didn't go off the edge of the frame.

Originally, this assignment was a still image project because of the difficulty of capturing video of the Aurora Borealis. If you search the internet, there are very few videos of the Aurora. Typically any video you see of the northern lights is made with still photography and then that series of long-exposure images are put together to create a time-lapse video. The reason for this is that most Aurora Borealis light shows are not all that bright. On occasion you get some bright northern lights but that is the exception rather than the norm. In the two or three years we have been waiting for everything to line up some of the upper echelon decision makers at Red Bull changed out and video became a request for this project as well—since video tends to do better than still images on social media. This presented a huge technical issue as capturing video would require a fairly bright Aurora. To capture the video side of things, veteran cinematographer Collin Harrington was brought in to figure out the logistics and make it happen.

Once we were onsite, the skydivers did a daytime wingsuit skydive (as shown on the previous two pages) to get themselves situated and test out the landing area in daylight. On that skydive, we also had Mike Brewer, who would be flying the cameras test out my Nikon Z6 and the bite trigger to make sure everything worked as planned. Before they took off in the helicopter we all had a group safety meeting and discussed the landing plan to help coordinate the landing images. For the under canopy images, I needed the skydivers to make a long straight landing so I could judge their height and speed to line up the motion blur images as they came in for a landing. As can be seen in the images on the previous page it was a cloudy afternoon when we were testing the camera, the flight and the landing zone. There were quite a few things to figure out on the skydiving end of things and a lot to make sure would work on the still photography end of things as well. This daytime skydive was critical for all of us to literally get everything lined up.

As it started to get darker Mike, Jeff and I headed out to the back porch of the house we were based out of and started testing the camera exposure and flash settings. One of the key things we had to dial in was the lighting on the skydivers themselves. We had them put LED strip lights into their wingsuits so that the camera could focus and so that Jon and Jeff could see each other in the sky. What we found out right away was that the LED strip lights were still too bright. Originally, I wanted them to be white lights, but we found out that by switching the LEDs to red that the light was considerably dimmer. Hence, we went with the red light. Even with the red lights, the camera was struggling to focus on Jeff as he walked towards camera and with a three second exposure we were getting a lot of light bleed from the LEDs. I figured the motion blur of the LED lights would trail the skydivers in the air so I wasn't too concerned with that but it certainly looked a lot different than the images I had thought through before arriving on site. Of more concern was whether or not the camera would be able to focus on the skydivers. The small Nikon TTL flash did help out with that as it popped a pre-flash off at the beginning of the exposure to figure out the amount of light required to illuminate the subject—and this also helped establish the distance for the autofocus as well. I dialed in the exposure settings and turned down the flash exposure compensation to -1.3, and then we just had to hope everything would come together up in the sky.

While we were testing out the still camera and the flash settings on the back deck, Collin Harrington was also testing out the video settings to see how it might look. If he hadn't been out there with us figuring out the exposure for the video cameras then I would have not clued into one very critical technical aspect of my whole concept. About a half hour after we dialed in the camera settings, I realized that Colin's video camera eliminated a lot of the red-light haze because he was using a faster (i.e. shorter) shutter speed. He and I talked about this at length trying to problem solve the haze issue. Once I figured out that the shutter speed could lessen that issue Mike, Jeff and I went back out on the porch and tested the theory. It seemed to help but honestly, I wasn't sure this whole plan was going to work.

Later that evening, it was clear that video would be the first priority as it was technically more difficult to capture the Aurora on video than it would be for the stills and the Aurora was slated to be brighter and more consistent that first night. Luckily, the clouds parted around 11:30 PM and we could see a decent Aurora forming. Shortly thereafter, it was decided that stills would go first instead of video. Since we had the camera already set up it was just a matter of changing the camera out on top of Mike's helmet. But as the skydivers walked out to the helicopter, I was internally quite skeptical of what we might get and a little worried my plan might not work at all.

As painful as it is for me as a photographer to say, these air-to-air images (shown on the following page and on the double-page spread on pages 36-37) are not my images—I have to give the credit to Mike Brewer—and of course Jeff and Jon as well, who are the heroes of these air-to-air images. These are Mike Brewers photographs (the air-to-air ones). While in the air, Mike Brewer saw something I couldn't imagine before the flight and as a talented photographer himself, he changed up the game plan because he saw the Aurora was closer to the horizon rather than straight above them. He flew just below and to the side of Jeff and Jon to force the Aurora into the

background of the images. So not only was he flying in extremely cold temperatures—close to -21 F (-29.4 C) when they exited the helicopter—but as soon as they were up to speed going 120 mph the windchill was over -100 F (-73 C). It was Mike's on the spot rethinking of the composition, his incredible ability to place himself where he needed to be and Jeff and Jon's abilities to hold position that all came together to create these air-to-air images.

Once Jon, Jeff and Mike landed we headed inside to check out the images and warm up. Mike handed me his helmet with the camera on it—and I pushed the playback button to start reviewing images. I had gotten through three images of varying light patterns—which were basically abstract art gibberish—when the video crew asked us to hold up so they could film our reactions to the images. I looked at Mike and we both had the same thought, "Oh, crap, what if there is nothing on here?"

A few minutes later myself and the skydivers—along with the Red Bull Producers also looking on—starting going through the images. Those first three abstract light streak images kept us in suspense and then the first flying image came up and Mike and I were instantly blown away and much happier. We were going backwards through the images so the farther along we went the closer Mike was to the wingsuit skydivers—and the better the images got. The motion blur of the red light made it look like the skydivers were on fire flying under the Aurora Borealis. Having the red LEDs in the wingsuits is something none of us had thought about but it worked out beautifully in hindsight. The images turned out quite different than the images I had in mind—but they were even better than anything I think any of us could have dreamed up. That right there—the planning, the execution, and the surprise after we created the images—and seeing something we could not have imagined is what has made this project so exciting for all of us involved. Instantly, the buzz spread to everyone involved in the project. It felt like we had just pulled off a magic trick—and a project that seemed nearly impossible to pull off was now suddenly a reality.

The first air-to-air image (shown on the previous page) was the best image from the flight and the shot where Mike Brewer was closest to Jon and Jeff. But there were other wild images as well. The image in the double page spread (shown on pages 36-37), as they leapt from the helicopter, was so wild I had to have a discussion with Mike as to what is actually happening in the image. The light streaks in that image are from the helicopter and the streaks were created because Mike, Jon and Jeff are falling away from the helicopter. The red and green colors around the helicopter are motion blur blobs from lights on the helicopter itself. Apparently, and I did not know this beforehand, helicopters have different colored lights on each side when they fly at night so that oncoming flight traffic can tell which side of the helicopter they are approaching. Hence, the green and red lights. The weird plating on the bottom of the helicopter is because the lights on the helicopter are blinking off and on. This image in particular shows the Aurora but also surprised me in so many ways as there is a lot I could not have anticipated.

In addition to the air-to-air images, on this same skydive, I was in position to create a motion-blur swoop landing image—as discussed previously. Both Jeff and Jon swooped in straight above my position and I wasn't able to reposition the camera quickly enough but Mike Brewer came in just as we had discussed and I was able to get


Red Bull

the swooping image as can be seen in the double-page spread on pages 40-41. For this image, I had an assistant hold my Elinchrom FIVE strobe about 100-feet (30 meters) to camera right and we turned the flash down all the way. The flash was set to TTL mode as we could not predict the distance the skydiver would be from the flash. Even with the flash turned all the way down the subject in this image is quite bright—just on the edge of being blown out. But, the wicked fast flash duration of the strobe—a little over one eight thousandth of a second (t0.1)—froze the motion of the skydiver at the end of the exposure just as I had planned. On that first jump this was the only usable image I got from the ground. Knowing I had this one swoop motion blur image made me feel a whole lot better as we walked back into the lodge to look at the air-to-air images described above.

For the swooping image we used a similar concept of a long shutter speed to show the Aurora and a powerful flash to illuminate the skydivers as they came in for a landing. The timing to make this work—and the skill of the athlete who was at that point freezing from an epic flight—all had to come together. In three attempts we got this one image of Mike where everything aligned just perfectly. The lights blurring behind Mike with the Aurora right behind him was the icing on the cake. The fact that this image was created on the same skydive as Mike's incredible air-to-air images kind of blows me away. Everything we wanted to get (save for the portraits of the team) essentially came together in the span of two minutes on one skydive. And that was the only skydive we would get for the still images.

Once the athletes were down it took them a while to warm back up. Now the emphasis turned towards capturing the same scenario on video. Sadly, the Aurora faded over the next few hours so we were up until 3 AM waiting for good Aurora to capture the video. There was one decent spell of Aurora but it was not deemed bright enough so we called it a night at 3:30 AM. The buzz around the still images was so high that everyone was talking about how this might end up just being a still photography project. But we still had another night of Aurora the next day and the team held out hope that we could capture what we needed in another 24 hours.

The next day the team did another skydive over the Knik Glacier (as shown on the following page) just up the road from our lodge. Jeff, Jon and Mike landed on the toe of the glacier and it made for some wild images with them landing just outside of an ice cave. We did a few group portraits there as well (as shown on page 35) since it was a very unusual place to see wingsuit skydivers. In that group image, is Jon, Jeff and Mike as well as Amy Chmelecki (in the pink jacket), who is also a team member of the Red Bull Air Force and who ran ground logistics for this project.

Later that second evening, the Aurora was lackluster at best. It wasn't looking good for the video crew. It was our pilot, Ryan from Alpha Aviation Alaska, who saved the day and walked into the packing room and told the team to get ready to take off. We had been checking the Aurora every ten minutes all night so we were a bit surprised by Ryan's call to action. He was a local and had flown a lot in Alaska so he had some intuition (or information we didn't have) that the Aurora was about to kickoff. Following Ryan's call the team headed out to the helicopter and just as he predicted there was a two minute spell of brighter Aurora that allowed the team to jump and get video of the


Red Bull

wingsuit skydive under the Aurora. You can see some of that video footage in an Instagram post shared by the Red Bull Air Force. Once the video was captured, the post-production team jumped into action and shortly there after we watched the footage as a group on a giant TV in the lodge. Everyone involved in the project was absolutely ecstatic that we were able to pull off this ridiculously tough assignment and capture not only the still images but also some incredible video footage as well. I was also elated that we got the video as I felt pretty bad for Colin, the cinematographer brought in for this project, who was unable to get anything the first night. The video just capped off the entire project—and everyone was so buzzed by the magic of the evening that it was difficult to go to sleep that night.

While the video post-production guys were working up the video I had one last image I needed to create to wrap up the stills portion of the assignment. We could not go home without a portrait of the wingsuit skydivers under the Aurora Borealis. Hence, I set up the battery-powered strobe and dialed in the settings for a group portrait just off the back porch of the lodge. Once we had it dialed in we brought the skydivers out in their full kits and had them pose for the final group shot. As can be seen on the following page, they were a bit amped up because at this point they knew we had pulled off a project that had been a dream for three years or more.

This assignment and this collaboration was a long time coming—and from the start a group of individuals (all of whom are close friends after working together for so long) came together to solve all the logistics and technical issues to make it happen. And on top of that, this collaboration created a set of images that have never been created before and we managed to even exceed my own concept and expectations. Often you dream up an image and have that in your mind as the ultimate image. It is extremely rare in my experience to go well beyond that image you created in your mind. And by exceedingly rare, I mean it almost never happens and in thirty years of working as a pro photographer there are only a handful of times I have seen it happen. This was one of those times.

This assignment has also been a huge source of inspiration not just for me but also for the team, who are now dreaming up even bigger, more challenging projects to go after. For myself, it is inspiring to see a near impossible project come to fruition and also get a taste of that photography magic that rarely happens—even when photographing dozens and dozens of assignments each year. That magic can be a turning point in a career and has already given me a lot of inspiration to keep on pushing my creativity in both personal projects and assignments.

Creating images that are nearly impossible to pull off is what really gets me excited—I love pushing into unknown territory and working with a team to create something completely new in the photographic space. That has only happened a handful of times in my career and it very rarely happens in the photographic space but there is magic in those endeavors. A huge thanks to Red Bull for this assignment and to Jon DeVore, Jeff Provenzano, Mike Brewer and Amy Chmelecki as well as Jay Brooks for making this all happen. Additionally, to all of the Red Bull in-house managers and producers, it took all of us to pull this one together and I can't wait for the next adventurous assignment like this one with Red Bull. Congratulations to Jon, Jeff and Mike for being the first humans to ever wingsuit skydive under the Northern Lights.

# portfolio

# A Glimmer of Hope

*by Michael Clark*

The Artemis II launch was quite an experience. Beforehand, it was dubious as to whether the launch would happen at all. Back in February, when NASA fueled up the rocket and did a test run on the entire process there were quite a few hydrogen leaks, which can make for a very dangerous scenario. Once they fixed the seals and the rocket was rolled back out to the pad in March, they opted not to do another fueling test as apparently that puts undo strain on the rocket. Hence, when the April 1 window arrived and we were all standing out at the Press Site, I was very surprised to see the fueling go so smoothly. In fact, I would say we were almost taken by surprise that the rocket was actually going to launch.

At T minus ten minutes, it became very clear that this was happening. Of course, those of us documenting the launch in the Press Site had been ready for several hours as we all arrived nearly eight hours beforehand. The launch went so smoothly that it was hard to process. Artemis II seemed to jump off the LC-39B launch pad even quicker than Artemis 1 did four years ago. And because April 1st was one of only two launch windows where the rocket could launch during daylight hours, it seemed to have even more impact on viewers. After it cleared the launch tower, people around me were screaming, crying, and shouting with joy. This launch affected us differently. Precisely because there were four humans on the rocket, who were headed to the Moon, it made this launch an entirely different affair than the last Artemis launch.

In the days that followed after the launch, it became clear to me—and all of us for that matter—just what a big deal this was. In these dark days; with war fomenting in Iran, a President who has completely lost touch with reality, and the world changing at breakneck speed, it was soothing to see scientists, engineers, pilots and experts in their fields all come together for an ambitious mission to go to the Moon. Sure, we have been to the Moon before. We aren't necessarily breaking new ground here. But just as with the Apollo missions in the late 60s and early 70s, when humans dare to venture farther than they ever have before in such a grandiose manner, that awakens something in all of us. For ten days as the four astronauts flew to the Moon and back, there was a glimmer of hope that humanity is not doomed. If we can go to the Moon, perhaps we can come together and solve our big problems like climate change, inequality, racism, greed, war and many others.

If nothing else, the inspiration this Artemis II mission offered to millions, has created an entirely new set of space fans who will dream of outer space. I was once one of those who dreamed of becoming an astronaut. And it was a dream come true to be there on the day that we launched humans back towards the Moon. More to come on Artemis II in the next issue of the Newsletter.


*The rollout of the NASA Artemis II rocket at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida on Saturday, January 17, 2026. The crew is spraying water onto the crushed rock track (shown in the bottom of the image) that the crawler is driving over and the maximum speed of the crawler is a slow 0.83 miles per hour (1.3 kph). I will have a full article on my experience photographing the Artemis II Launch in the Summer 2026 issue of the Newsletter.*