

HUMAN NATURE

HOW DO YOU GET A PICTURE PERFECT SNAP WHEN THE WEATHER AND WILDLIFE ARE THE ONES CALLING THE SHOTS? MICHAEL SNEDIC MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO TALK TO THE ANIMALS BUT HIS IMAGES SPEAK VOLUMES ABOUT THEIR VULNERABILITY

WORDS: EMILY MACDONALD



Perched high among the tree tops in Lamington National Park, Michael Snedic sat camouflaged 22 precarious metres above the ground so as not to ruffle the feathers of the Pacific Baza which was feeding a chick in her nest.

It took Michael and his documentary-maker mentor Glen Threlfo all day to build the photographic tower complete with "hide".

"The wind would blow and I knew I was safe but still," Michael says.

"The photos were brilliant but the experience was even better.

"To me the amazing experiences are always number one and photos are a bonus."

Growing up in Sydney after moving from

Slovenia at age three with his parents, Michael always had a love of the outdoors.

But while other children were making mud pies his attention was on the world around him.

"When I was little mum knew how to shut me up — she'd call me in for the Attenborough docs," Michael says.

"I always liked wildlife and nature, even as a little boy it was everything. I loved bird watching."

So Michael set his mind to jobs which would allow him to work where there were blue skies overhead and the sun on his back.

First he would be an aviary keeper at Taronga Zoo, the sound of birdsong in his ears.

Later, he'd make the move to the Gold Coast

to work as an eco tour guide at O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat, pointing out all manner of native critters to his wide-eyed guests with a national park as his office.

But although he was surrounded by the things he loved most, there was something missing even if he didn't quite know what it was just yet.

Michael was 31 when he met Glen while working at O'Reilly's.

"I'd had so many experiences in nature. Sunsets, rainbows — wouldn't it be wonderful to photograph it to show my family and friends?" Michael says.

"Glen was a professional wildlife documentary maker and photographer so he

asked me would I like to learn."

Michael's first photographic assignment was to build a camouflaged hide in the national park in search of the rare Albert's lyrebird.

Only three people had ever captured a photo of the male bird, found only in a 100km radius of the national park, displaying his plumage and Glen wanted Michael to become number four.

"I sat in there for seven weeks," Michael says.

"When I was sure the bird wasn't there I'd go out and have a stretch and I'd only go back to O'Reilly's to sleep at night.

"When you get the shot I can't say it any other way than it's exhilarating. The hair on the back of the neck stands up. As you can see it's

about to happen the mouth dries, the heart races."

Michael, now 50, is based in Brisbane and has been working as a nature photographer ever since.

While his days of catching six return plane flights to Port Douglas and taking 50 boat trips before he captured an osprey with a fish in its claws are in the past, Michael's photographic adventures continue.

He has plans to lead photographic workshops to the Arctic and Antarctica next year as well as a series focusing on local wildlife in Australia.

Recently he led an expedition to Rwanda where he was photo-bombed by a mountain

gorilla which appeared to be laughing behind his back.

He is also both the ambassador and judge for the upcoming Nature Conservancy's photographic competition which aims to draw attention to the fragile environment and species Michael so enjoys capturing.

"I feel really thankful to nature and wildlife because they have given me my relaxation, my creativity and my haven," he says. "It might be an aurora, a sunset a brightly coloured red fungi or chicks being fed. I love it."

The Nature Conservancy Australia's Photo Competition opens Monday. For details go to natureaustralia.org.au



MICHAEL'S TIPS:

- Overcast weather creates even, diffused lighting, which makes for nicer rainforest images, rather than the harsh light produced on a sunny day.
- Having something in the foreground, such as a lichen-covered rock, adds that extra "something" to any landscape image.
- When photographing wildlife and hand-holding a large lens, use the widest aperture (lowest number) available, as this gives you a higher shutter speed and there is less chance of a blurry image.
- Get to know your camera settings really well so that when a situation presents itself, such as a bird-in-flight, you are ready to take the shot.
- Observing wildlife behaviour is a key to getting great behaviour or action shots. Watching an individual beforehand and seeing what it will do often helps you preempt any possible behaviours. You can then be ready to shoot with your camera.
- Tripods and remotes are essential when photographing a sunrise or sunset. Since the ambient light will be very low, trying to hand-hold a large lens will usually result in a blurry image.

