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# CONFESSIONS OF A VALIDATION JUNKIE

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An interview with Professional Photographer, Jeff Clow

Written by Kent DuFault



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## INTRODUCTION

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By his own admission, Jeff Clow will tell you that just a few years ago, he was nothing more than a point-and-shoot family photographer.

That's pretty amazing when you consider where he is at today.

Jeff is living the dream.

He is a full-time professional landscape and travel photographer. His office is mobile, and it usually lands in places like the Grand Teton National Park of the United States.

But, that wasn't always the case.

Clow has always been a hard-working, determined individual. For years, he made his living as a leadership consultant, working in the industries of food packaging and home healthcare products.

The man has talent and charisma; there is no mistake about that.

However, he was about as far away from creating amazing landscape photographs, and intimate portraits of a moose, as one could get.

His world was meeting rooms and convention centers. So, how does a guy like this turn himself into the sought after Pro Photographer that he is today?

Clow credits the Internet. He says it all started with a Flickr account back in 2004.

For most of us, that seems almost impossible to believe.

But consider this...

Jeff Clow's Flickr account currently has 12,700 followers, and it has received 4.5 million views in the last five years.

On top of that, he has 18,260 followers on 500px, and 52,709 people have him in their circles on Google+.

When Jeff Clow communicates, people are listening, whether it's words or photographs.

If the Internet Photographic Community ever creates it's own version of the Rock' N' Roll Hall of Fame, Clow's bust will be sitting at the head of the altar.

But here is the best part about Jeff: he is a super nice guy. It comes through in his photographs. It comes through in his words. It comes through in his big, wide, Texas smile.

I'm going to let Jeff tell you his story. However, I'm going to leak one little secret. I'm going to tell you this because... it says so much about his personality.

Several years ago, Jeff started his own Photo Tour Company in the United States. It's called "Dirt Cheap

Photo Tours". He named his company this unusual title because he wanted to create a workshop experience that anyone could afford to take. Now, if you've ever looked into photography workshops, you know what he's talking about; they tend to be very spendy.

Listen to what some of his past clients have had to say about him...

*"I can personally say that Jeff is very talented and is a fantastic tour guide! I recently completed his tour of the Grand Teton National Park—and it was out of this world!! Definitely "better things" to photograph. Jeff took us to the best locations at the right time for the right light!! And, the icing on the cake was that we got to personally witness a mother grizzly and her two cubs as she was training them to hunt elk—a once in a lifetime experience!! Thanks, Jeff—you're the best!!" – Nancy Harris*

*"Jeff is someone I deeply respect and admire." – Roni*

*"Jeff's photography is fantastic, and his energy and passion for his craft is palpable." – Daryl Hunter*

And these are just a few of the testimonials from the hundreds of people that love this guy!

So, how does a man go from wearing a three-piece suit and teaching executives how to manage their workforce to guiding small, intimate groups of excited photographers around the backwoods of the wilderness?

Let's find out, shall we?





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## THE INTERVIEW

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**KD:** "Jeff, thanks for joining us for this interview. As I have gotten to know you a little bit over these last few days, I've learned that you are a real family man. Your family is important to you. You've been married many years. You have children that you've mentioned frequently in other interviews. Knowing this brings up a question that I **MUST** ask... What was your wife's reaction the moment you told her that you were leaving your job as a **Corporate Consultant** to become a **Landscape and Travel Photographer**?"

**JC:** "It wasn't as dramatic as it might seem. She had watched me get better at photography and was the impetus for me to go out and buy my first DSLR. She encouraged me to start the photo tour business and to write my first book. As the business started to take off, we both discussed it as a profession as opposed to just a sideline. It certainly doesn't pay anywhere near what consulting does, but as that part of my life was winding down, she was very supportive of me pursuing a new profession that I find very rewarding. Without her in the equation none of it would have happened. Having a supportive wife - and is - a marvelous thing."

**KD: "We know that prior to just a few years ago your photographic background consisted of primarily snapshots of the family. Yet today, you create world-class wildlife photography such as the owl photograph (above). There are photographers out there with Masters Degrees in Wildlife Biology that don't create images this compelling. Did you know anything about wildlife habitat and behavior before you began your photographic career?"**

**JC:** "No, I didn't. But early in my career I started looking at literally thousands of other photos. I gave up television for the most part and used that newly found free time to view so many great wildlife and nature photos online that were starting to be shared. I tried my hand at it first by shooting macro in my garden.

It was a lot of trial and error - mostly error. But slowly but surely I learned to pay attention to the behavior of the animal and also pay attention to the background, the light, the composition and the "moment". But the key was seeing other photographer's great wildlife photos. After I viewed them so many times, I started to understand what 'works' visually."

**KD: "You and I have talked about how you got started. You discovered Flickr. You uploaded photos. You realized people that you didn't know were looking at them and giving you comments. You decided that you had to get better. Describe for us the moment when you realized that photography was something that you wanted to do for your life's work.**

**Was it an epiphany or were you just tired of your old way of life? The decision to switch careers couldn't have been an easy one."**

**JC:** "The whole journey has been somewhat an accident. To say anything else would be incorrect. It started by me reading about Flickr in the Wall Street Journal as a place to back up photos. That was long before the Cloud was even talked about - and I had a couple of hundred family photos that I wanted to preserve.

Then some kind soul commented on one of my photos - heck, I didn't even know that Flickr had a commenting capability at that time. But the epiphany was almost instantaneous about improving my photography - if some strangers were starting to look at my photos, I sure wanted to get better at the skill of crafting them.

So I read everything online that I could find and I started spending hours commenting on photos. I told people what I liked or how good I thought their photo was and - not surprisingly - they began to view my photos online as well. I admit that I am a validation junkie. Always have been. I take pictures for two reasons. I enjoy the experience of being out in nature in some of the world's best locations, but I also very much enjoy having people view them. For me, a photo that sits on a hard drive and isn't seen by others is only part of photography. The more compelling part for me is having it seen by others. And the world of photo sharing online is perfect for that.





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We all have an expiration date of our lives. I didn't want mine to be simply one of way too many minutes of my life wasted in conference rooms or windowless auditoriums. Although money is a nice way to keep score in today's society - and it makes life much easier when it comes to making the house payment - it is ultimately pretty darn hollow as a reward if you also have a creative side. But having people tell you how much your photography has made them be able to see things that they never could see any other way, well, for me that is very rewarding."

**KD: "Once you had determined that photography was a passion, and you wanted to pursue it... Why landscape and travel photography? That's an unusual step into this career path. Most photographers start their careers by shooting weddings, family portraits, or even high school portraits. Didn't the idea of landscape and travel photography seem risky?"**

**JC:** "Perhaps because I didn't set out to be a pro. I set out to be better at photography. My wife and I were very fortunate that my consulting career afforded us the opportunity to visit a lot of great places. She grew up outdoors and was in love with nature, so together we started going to places like the Tetons and Glacier National Park and Moab - and I started attempting to get some good shots that didn't have my family as the main subject.

One of my first big hits was a shot I took of the famous Moulton barn in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It resonated with people and it got tons of comments and ultimately was featured on the front page of Flickr. That alone got

me hundreds of new followers and was a thrill I can still recall today. Strangers were telling me that I was pretty darn good at this thing called photography - and it was very fulfilling. And then I started getting requests to use some of my photos in commercial ad campaigns because they saw my work online.

I was surprised and pleased and somewhat amazed that it was all happening.

My photo career has always been equal parts risk and reward. Remember that originally it was simply a sideline that blossomed. If I had set out to be a professional photographer, I may well have followed a different path."

**KD: "Your business model seems to be comprised of three components: you sell stock photography; you sell prints and other photo related products; and you lead photo tours. Let's talk about the photo tours for a minute. You've been an educator most of your life, so teaching most likely comes pretty easy for you. But, once you decided that you wanted to run photo tours, how did you logistically set it up? What did you feel in your gut, on your first tour, when all those individuals were staring at you waiting for you to teach them something?"**

**JC:** "I was - and am - very fortunate in that I was gifted with good verbal and leadership skills. I had a very supportive mother who encouraged me throughout my youth. I learned to stand up and talk in front of people and along the way lost that fear of it that plagues many people.



For my first photo tour I simply scouted out locations until I had dozens of them figured out with things like the best time to be at one place versus the other. I set up a route and had backup places set in case the light wasn't right or if it was too windy - or any of the other variables that can occur unexpectedly.

I had never been on a photo tour and so I decided to conduct one the way that I would want to be treated if I was a participant. I didn't want to tell anyone what to do or what camera or lens he or she should use. I wanted to help them stand in front of better things without having to spend hours or days scouting out locations.

But the number one thing was always to make it a fun event. Spending hours shooting with others can be a lot of fun if nobody takes themselves too seriously. I never allowed anyone to think of me as "the instructor". I was the leader and I was there for any questions they had - about their camera, the scene or how I would compose a photo if they wanted to ask me about those things.

And I got to know about them - how they got into photography, what they liked to shoot, what they were trying to get better at currently. We talked, and within a relatively short amount of time we became friends. Soon I was driving around with a dozen new friends shooting photos and the camaraderie was wonderful.

Five years later I am still friends with everyone on that first photo tour - and many of them have gone on two or three additional photo tours with me.

I have never been nervous about helping others in photography. My years helping others in the business world by listening and then offering advice was a great platform to help me become good at photo tours. But I have always been approachable and never allowed any brush with fame go to my head. I would rather miss a shot and help someone else get the shot because I know that it could be a highlight of their photographic career.

In fact, one of my good friends originally was a stranger when he joined me on his first photo tour a couple of years ago. He came up to me as we were kicking off and said, "Hey Jeff, I've got a big request for you." I said, "Sure - let's hear it." He told me that he had never taken a photo that he was proud enough of to hang in his own home. He wondered if I could help him make that happen.

He got "the" shot the next day at a spot I took him to with the group. The light was good, the scene was pristine and we talked a bit about how I liked to compose shots at this location. He took some photos and then came up to me beaming. "I got it, Jeff. I finally got a wall hanger!"

The look on his face and the tone of his voice was something very special. I helped him have that moment and that is a payoff that doesn't have a dollar sign associated with it."



**KD: "Since we are on the subject of your photo tours... (I'm chuckling... as Jeff has already shared this story with me). Please tell our readers the infamous story about when you were leading an early morning photo tour, and a woman stopped her car to ask you a question... LOL."**

**JC:** "I was leading a photo tour with a group of about a dozen photographers. We had gotten up at oh dark thirty and headed out for the Oxbow Bend overlook. We got there in time to set up as the sun slowly began to illuminate the scene. There was a chill in the air but we were all excited about the perfect mirror reflection that was starting to appear in the still water before us. Imagine the scene - all of us with our tripods up and our cameras all pointed in the same direction.

A car pulled up just behind us as we stood there. I heard a window being rolled down and started to turn. The lady looks at me and says, "Why aren't you shooting the bear?" Of course, I laughed out loud as I imagined her pulling our combined legs. And then she pointed. I can still see her arm extended in my mind.

Twenty yards behind all of us there's a big brown grizzly walking across the road. Everyone sees it at the same instant. I believe someone said, "Are you KIDDING me?"

We all have wide-angle lenses on our tripods and there's a mad scramble as several people rush back to the vehicles to get their long lenses. The bear sees the movement and scrambles up the hill without any of us getting the shot.

But the adrenalin rush was there. And we were all in a state of surprise and wonder.

What a moment. What a morning."

**KD: "Does your family help you out with your business? Or is it all, Jeff Clow?"**

**JC:** "My wife is very helpful in the business. She's a great travel planner and is wonderful at helping me schedule my trips. But most importantly, she runs the household when I am away. I can concentrate on my participants and the adventure of the photo tour without having to worry about things back home. She frees me up to be solely focused on the tour the whole time I am in the field."

**KD: "You seem to have a special affinity for the Grand Teton National Park in Northwestern Wyoming. Tell us about that. Is it personal? Is it a photographic gem? Is it easy to guide groups of photographers there? Give us the inside scoop..."**

**JC:** "Several reasons. It is a stellar location with so many world-class landscape photo scenes available. In fact, it was recently voted the number one landscape photo spot in the world by the readers of a well-known photo magazine.

It has abundant wildlife and it is easily accessible. It has the well-known spots like Oxbow Bend and the Moulton barns - and then many off the beaten locations like Buffalo Fork Ridge and the Hedrick Pond Overlook.



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And - unlike so many other national parks - it is fairly compact. It is about 50 miles long and about 30 miles wide so you spend a lot of time shooting and very little time driving.

It is a gem that every landscape and nature photographer should put on his or her bucket list. And of course, they could always join me for my spring or summer or fall photo tours there."

**KD: "Tell us a location that you've never been to, one that is on your personal photographic wish list and why you would like to photograph that location."**

**JC:** "New Zealand. Soaring mountains and rolling hills and valleys. Having seen it via the magic of The Lord of the Rings movies, it is on my own personal bucket list as a photographer."

**KD: "You told me that when you first heard the term 'stock photography' you had no idea what that industry was. Many of our readers may not know as well. Tell us a little bit about how you learned about stock photography. Tell us what additional lessons you've learned about the stock photo industry as it became an integral part of your business. Does 'shooting for stock' alter how you might approach a photographic opportunity?"**

**JC:** "Once again, the accidental part of my journey shows it head when we start talking about stock.

I received an email from a stranger many years ago mentioning that I should look at selling some of my photos as "stock" photos. I literally had to look up what that meant since I had never heard the term.

What I learned is that there was a growing number of photographers who were working with online photo agencies to license their photos via the Internet. And they were allowing anyone to apply by providing a portfolio of a dozen images to be reviewed by a professional editor.

I put together what I thought were my best shots and sent them in only to have them rejected outright almost immediately. That was a blow. But it fueled my fire and I started reading about the industry and attempting to get better stock photos.

Six months later I was accepted. I learned that good stock photos have many elements, including color, brightness, appeal, and - here's a big one - space for copy or text within the image.

So today when I look at a scene, I also think about leaving some empty space within the frame for copy. A commercial client wants to use photos to sell a product or a service - and the photo has to be right for their situation.

A great landscape photo doesn't always make a good stock photo. But if there is space above the scene - like more clouds in the composition or a meadow of green that figures prominently - then it is potentially much more useful in an advertisement.





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And having people in a scene is also important. Having a person sitting on the bank looking at the scene helps complete the story-telling aspect of stock photography. A good landscape stock photo helps the viewer say in their mind, "that could be me sitting there," and it can be used by hotels, travel companies and many other businesses in the leisure industry."

**KD: "Jeff, what do we need to know about "Dirt Cheap Photo Tours"? How do we sign up? Where do you go? Is each tour limited to a certain size? Do you require a certain ability level? Do you require certain equipment? Does it include travel, housing, food, etc.? How does a Photzy member get onto one of your tours?"**

**JC:** "My photo tour name has morphed over the years from Dirt Cheap Photo Tours to the use of my name. They are still reasonably priced, but I had a number of people tell me that they didn't like the original name since it had a negative "cheap" connotation.

So, Jeff Clow Photo Tours is what my tours are called these days. I have a website with some basic information ([www.jeffclowphototours.com](http://www.jeffclowphototours.com)), but I encourage people to contact me via email for more robust information about pricing, dates, locations, hotels, etc.

The only requirement is a camera. There is nothing else required. I have people that are 30-year pros standing alongside relative newbies to the photography world. Because it is in equal parts tour and adventure, the

experience works well for all levels of photographers. In fact, often the more advanced shooters end up helping the newcomers as much as I do.

After all, when you are shooting with people who become fast friends...everyone wants to help each other succeed and get great photos.

The average group size is about a dozen people. My photo tours include transportation to and from the host hotel every day. They include entrance fees and all the special permit fees that are necessary to go off road in certain locations. And they include my guide fee, which is usually lower than other professional guides in the area.

The cost of travel (hotels, meals, airfare) is not included in the fee."

**KD: "You are based in Dallas. You were a busy man before your photography career. You told me that you've NEVER taken a photography course. You are completely self-taught, and yet your career has skyrocketed in a mere 5 years. How does this happen? What is your secret? If there is a secret..."**

**JC:** "No magic secrets. But the one thing that has consistently worked for me is the self-learning that comes from viewing thousands of photos taken by other photographers. There's no text needed. No special code. Just an ongoing look at what others are producing. Those good photos become imprinted on your brain and when you are in a similar situation down the road, your brain will help you remember what a good composition looks like.



It is like the muscle memory that so many athletes possess. Doing something over and over helps you to do it without thinking about it. It becomes second nature.

It sure has worked for me and I do believe it can work for anyone who sets out to make themselves better at the craft of photography."

**KD:** "This quote has been attributed to you in a number of places online: *"The first, and the most important (piece of advice to budding photographers) is the most easy to remember. If you want to take better travel and landscape photos, you've got to stand in front of better things. That's it. Pure and simple."* Taken from a global viewpoint, this comment seems pretty simple. You want to take great pictures? You must travel to great locations. But, now that I know you, I feel that this comment talks to a much deeper meaning. I personally think that it addresses issues like 'get out of bed for the sunrise when you would rather sleep in'. Am I right? Am I wrong? Tell me, what do these words REALLY mean to Jeff Clow?"

**JC:** "Yes - that's my quote, and it comes from my Teton photo guide book.

What I really mean is that a person is in control of what they photograph and that there are "better things" all around them. You don't have to stand in front of an iconic mountain - although that always helps. You can stand or kneel in your garden and capture a great photo of a frog or a flower. You can go to the neighborhood park and

photograph a swan or go to the zoo and photograph lots of animals.

It is too easy to sit inside one's home and say things like, "I don't have anything good to photograph". And that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But if you grab your camera and start looking closely, you'll see the world around you in a much different light.

Then things like aperture and focal length and ISO can come into play. But the biggest advice is to get out there and look for better things. Once you start doing that regularly, you'll be amazed at how many better things there are just waiting to be photographed."

**KD:** "I always try to conduct my interviews in a fashion that tries not to rely too heavily on technical matters. I like an interview that gives the readers more of a glimpse as to who the photographer is as a person. However, there are those out there who will feel disappointed if we don't hear what equipment you like to use and why."

**JC:** "Glad you asked me as this comes up often when people write to me.

I think there is way too much emphasis on gear - brands, lenses, accessories. Some of my best selling photos were taken with a consumer point and shoot with a 3.2 megapixel camera. Sure - good equipment is very nice to have, but the most important part of the equation is the person holding the equipment.



I shoot with a Nikon D800 and a Sony A7 currently. Both are very good tools.

All you really need is a camera. The rest is up to you. Pots and pans don't make the chef."

**KD: "Jeff, you are a true joy. It's been a pleasure talking to you. Photzy members, if you would like to talk to Jeff about his photo tours, there will be contact information at the end of this article. Don't miss out. I think you would really enjoy the experience."**

**JC:** "Thank you, Kent. It has been fun to talk about my journey with you. I appreciate you helping me share it with so many people."



## About Jeff Clow



[www.jeffclowphototours.com](http://www.jeffclowphototours.com)  
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Jeff Clow is a self-taught photographer, author, and photo tour host. He is the author of the best selling travel photo guide to the Grand Teton National Park. His photography work has been published worldwide, and it has been used in hundreds of advertising campaigns by companies as diverse as Disney and Time magazine. After a successful career as a leadership consultant, he currently leads photo tours to many national parks in North America.. He resides near Dallas, Texas, USA with his wife.



## About the Author



Kent DuFault is a professional photographer and author.

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