

An Interview With Twan Leenders

– Part 1 – Nanpa®



Twan Leenders Photographing in Panama

Interview by Dave Huth

In 1994, Roger Tory Peterson - an ornithologist and artist famous for his innovative and popular field guides - convened a gathering of more than 100 photographers for conversation about how nature photography might meet the challenge of conservation in the years ahead.

The result of this gathering, held at the [Roger Tory Peterson Institute](#) (RTPI) in Jamestown, New York, was the incorporation of the North

American Nature Photography Association (NANPA).

Today, RTPI carries on Peterson's passion for conservation, education, and the arts. Twan Leenders, an accomplished herpetologist and photographer, serves as RTPI's Senior Director of Science and Conservation. He has authored several books, including *Amphibians of Costa Rica - A Field Guide* and *Reptiles of Costa Rica - A Field Guide*, both through Cornell University Press.

Leenders' field guides present new and innovative forms of delivering scientific information, alongside stellar photography, in ways that are both beautiful and educational.

In this 2-part interview, Leenders discusses with Dave Huth (co-chair of NANPA's Conservation Committee), how he balances his many roles of scientist, photographer, communicator, and author. Huth participated in the design process of the amphibian guide, giving him an up-close view of Leenders's method and passion for science communication.

The following conversation reveals Leenders's insights into the future of photography as an integral part of conservation communication.



Twan Leenders|rtpi.org

Coral Snake, photo courtesy of Twan Leenders

Huth:

Your two recent field guides are packed with information, and are beautiful to look at.

Leenders:

Thank you! Amphibians and reptiles rarely receive the appreciation and respect they deserve and they are not usually equated with beauty. To have my books, which are filled to the rim with their pictures, be called 'beautiful' makes me happy because it is one of the things I want to get across to readers. Even though many people consider these animals creepy, slimy, or dangerous, I want my books to show readers how much beauty and intricacy exists in the lives of amphibians and reptiles.

Huth:

What do you consider a field guide's purpose to be? Who are field guides for, and what do you hope they accomplish in the world?

Leenders:

Field guides are powerful tools. They convey knowledge and invite you to open your eyes and your mind to things you may have taken for granted before.

I think that a good field guide can encourage individuals to learn more about nature and instill them with conservation values. However, a great field guide is one that does that as well as empowers a reader to become an active and engaged citizen scientist or conservationist. They may even entice you to go outside to look for creatures you never knew existed.

It should be a resource that not only shares what we know, but also conveys what we don't know to encourage readers to share their newfound knowledge and observations with professionals and with other naturalists alike.



Amphibians and reptiles rarely receive the appreciation and respect they deserve. Photo courtesy of Twan Leenders.

Huth:

The contents of these guides present 3 types of information: 1) your own original research and observations, 2) your compilation of published science, and 3) your own skilled photographic documentation of living animals. Do you consider yourself a scientist, a scholar, or a photographer?

Leenders:

I would say that I consider myself first and foremost a naturalist.

I am fascinated by the intricacies of nature and each moment of nature study leaves me with new questions. That curiosity is what originally put me on an academic trajectory early in my career.

I find that having a formal scientific background helps to frame research questions and design studies to find answers. However, after working several years in university settings I came to realize that I missed sharing my knowledge with a broader audience, rather than just my students and fellow researchers.



Photo courtesy of Twan Leenders

Huth:

It seems that photography is an important part of how you draw that broader audience to your love of nature.

Leenders:

I purchased my first SLR while I was an undergrad, just before embarking on my first trip to the tropics.

Knowing that I was privileged to visit sites and see species that not many people got to experience I figured I would make sure that I documented

everything. The fact that I had no idea how to operate my camera seemed irrelevant. I would return from expeditions after having carried bags full of exposed slide film around for many months, only to find out that much of it was useless.

But over the years, through much trial and error, I have learned to better use my photographic tools and skills, expedited by the advent of digital photography. No matter how much I enjoy photography, it is generally hard to fit it in during field work. I often find myself rushing through it in the wee hours of the night when everyone else in camp is sound asleep.

Given how photography is something I've personally developed rather than a formal part of my work and, given how much I still have to learn, it's hard for me to consider myself a photographer. I hope to someday get to a point where I can better balance field research with photography because I do absolutely love it!

[Part 2](#) was published Friday, July 24, 2020.

Dave Huth is a teacher, storyteller, picture maker, and whistler of jaunty tunes. He works as a professor of visual communication and media arts at Houghton College in western New York state. Dave is obsessed with finding new and effective ways to draw people into deep thinking and even deeper feeling about ecology and human life. He lives way out in the country where he rarely mows his lawn or rakes his leaves - which keeps opinionated humans at a distance and draws all other animals close. This is just the way he likes it.

