

This essay, *Adrenaline Light: The Landscape Photography of Carter Gowl*, by Alan S. Kesselheim, appeared in the Summer 2002 issue of *Big Sky Journal* magazine (pages 68 – 77). The following five PDF double-pages have been reproduced for this website with permission of the publisher.



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By Alan S. Kesselheim

ONE SUMMER EVENING, Carter Gowl set up his gear on a vantage he'd chosen in the Lamar Valley, not far from the road. For an hour or more he readied himself, preparing for late light. The weather built up around him. It started to rain. The rain turned to hail. The tight packed storm electrified the air. Just before dark, Gowl was hit by a microburst that knocked him down and sent his gear flying. He gathered himself, kept shooting. Well past dark, soaking wet, nerves jangling, he returned to his car.

"I consider myself very fortunate," Gowl says. Not, of course, because he survived, but because he got "a couple of really nice images."

For Gowl, the landscape that compels his photography is south-central Montana and the adjacent portions of Wyoming. More precisely, with a few exceptions, it is the northeast corner of Yellowstone

LAMAR RIVER VALLEY,
WYOMING

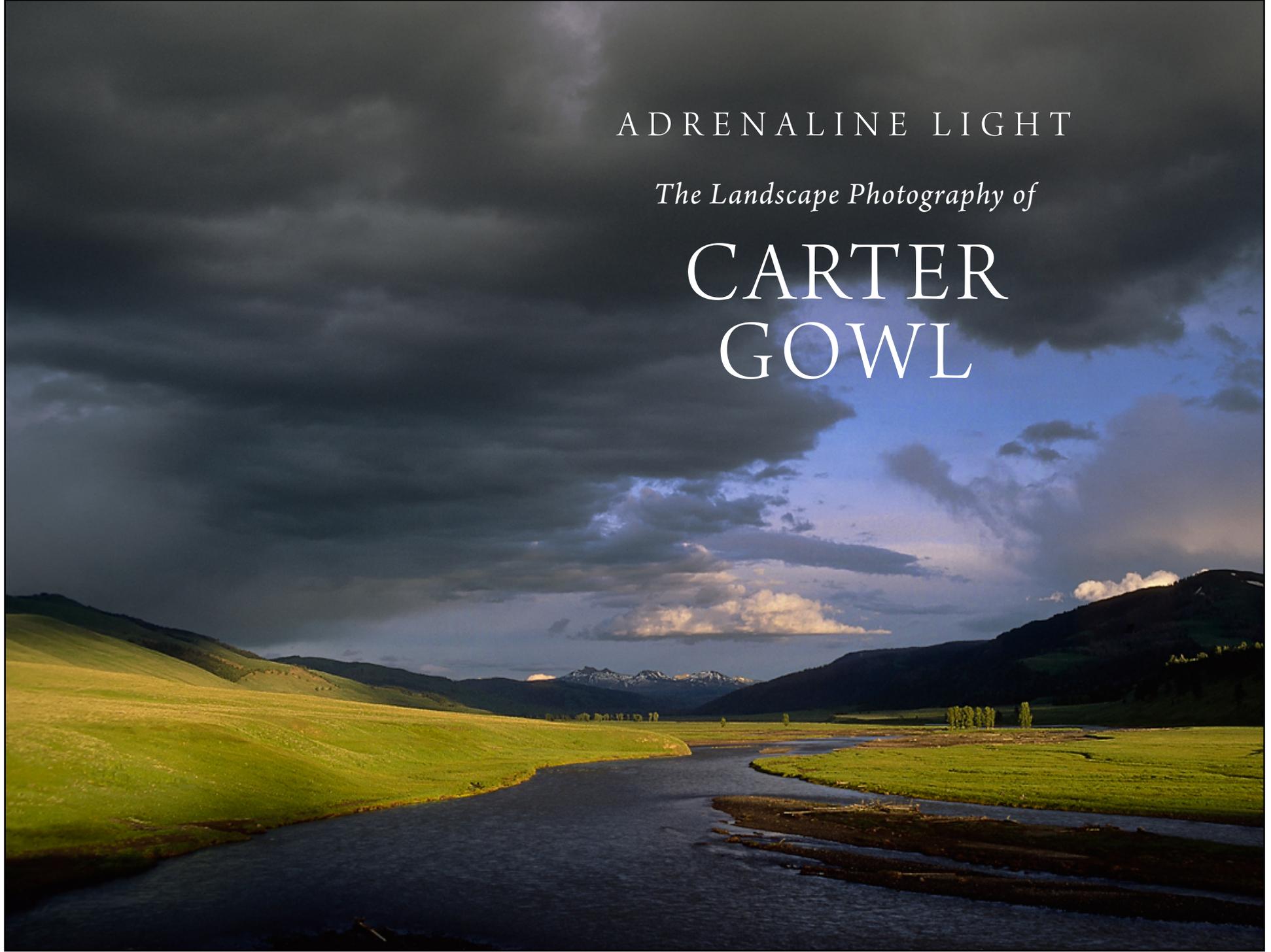
Late June 1997

Sundown in Yellowstone National Park

ADRENALINE LIGHT

The Landscape Photography of

CARTER
GOWL





LAMAR RIVER VALLEY, WYOMING

First week of March 1998

Minus thirty degrees Fahrenheit

Sundown in Yellowstone National Park

National Park and some specific quadrants of the Beartooth Plateau. Actually it gets even tighter than that.

For the preponderance of his work, Gowl draws from a couple of spots where a confluence of texture and composition and wildlife and lighting all works. A vantage point, for instance, just above the canyon of the Lamar River, looking upstream, at first and last light of day. Or the third meadow up Slough Creek, twelve miles in on the trail. Or Pilot Peak in the Beartooths.

As niches go, a person could do worse.

Gowl's geographic passion has roots. Although he's



LAMAR RIVER VALLEY, WYOMING

Mid-September 2001

Sundown in Yellowstone National Park

spent most of his adult life in the East, his earliest memories are steeped in the family tradition of summer fishing trips to Silver Gate and Cooke City. Later, as a young man he explored extensively in the Beartooth high country.

"Serious photography was never anywhere on my life list," Gowl admits.

A chance interaction with the owner of an art gallery in Cooke City encouraged him to take what had been an amateur interest more seriously. A decade later, his photography keeps him busy twelve months a year.



AMPITHEATER MOUNTAIN, WYOMING

Late June 2001

Early morning

Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains

“The best things in my life have all been surprises,” he says.

None of his personal roots matter when it comes to his photography. What matters is the light. Because this region is on the leeward side of the Beartooth uplift, where the air is high and rarified, it possesses light that is, on a regular basis, magic. It doesn’t hurt that the rampant topography also produces some righteous violence in the sky.

“There are four or five nights every summer when my adrenaline really gets pumping,” Gowl says.



LOWER AERO LAKE, MONTANA

Early August 1971 melt-off

Pilot and Index Peaks at center far horizon

Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains

I’M NO PHOTOGRAPHER, but I know the light he’s taking about. I’ve felt the same exultant pulse.

One twilight in the Lamar Valley, near the Buffalo Ranch, I stood off the road in the late summer grass while a pair of wolves, one black and one tawny, loped along the far bank, returning from an elk kill. They were lazy, long-legged, well-fed. A herd of bison bedded down in the foreground, dark lumps as big as the erratic boulders left by glaciers. In a spotlight flare of sun, two pronghorn cavorted at the edge of the stolid animals, dashing and feinting, fast as gazelles.



EMIGRANT PEAK, MONTANA

Mid-July 2001

Sundown on the Yellowstone River

Paradise Valley

For a time, then, and I don't know how long it lasted, the light fell like rain. The air was charged with it. A backlit cumulus brooded over the far ridge, whiter than virgin snow, billowing with violence. And the valley, with its urgent life, lay out beneath this benediction.

FOR THE PAST DECADE, Gowl has set up his base in Silver Gate each June and stayed through September. Until last year, he lived in an outbuilding that was "four walls, a roof and a lightbulb."

Creature comforts are not what Gowl comes for. He



PILOT AND INDEX PEAKS, WYOMING

Early August 2000

Evening on the Clark's Fork

of the Yellowstone River

Absaroka Beartooth Mountains

heads into the backcountry for as long as a week, hunkering in remote pockets, waiting for magic. Or he'll go out fresh each day to one of his patented spots. "Every year is so different," Gowl says. "The snowpack, the floodwaters, the angle of the sun."

On a typical outing, eager for first light on the third meadow of Slough Creek, he leaves Silver Gate at one-thirty in the morning, hikes twelve miles in the dark, packing gear, and sets up. He's back twenty-four miles later, around mid-day.

"Twenty-nine out of thirty times it's a bust," he says. The clouds move in, the sky turns hazy, the light is flat.



But then, a couple of times a year, the heart-swelling moment comes along, and he's waiting for it.

"If I get three or four really solid images a summer, it's been a good year."

It turns out that film and a camera are pretty blunt instruments when it comes to duplicating what the eye sees. That's why, for most of us, pictures are such a disappointment. No shot is ever as big, as layered, as potent, as our memory of it.

The really good photographers make up for that with a sensuous foreground to offset the magnificent sky, with exposures that don't just get the cloud, but capture the raked texture of gray air, or with the one out of dozens of rainbow shots that really nails the bright washed air on one side of the color spectrum, and the dense, thick, still-turbid air on the other.

They make up for it by walking twenty-four miles under a load of gear to be ready when, one time in thirty, there is a fifteen-minute window brimming with the light of magic

BSJ

LAMAR RIVER VALLEY,
WYOMING

Late June 1997

Sundown in Yellowstone