

Pushing Your LIMITS

INSPIRATION FROM YOUR PEERS



PHOTO: FRED ZUILL

BY DOUGLAS STEVENSON

I cannot rave enough about my joyful experience at **FirstLight Workshops Chesapeake Bay**, held over a week in September 2005 on the scenic Chesapeake Bay in Cambridge, MD. The event brought together 15 amateur and professional photographers to exercise their inherent creativity, aided through constructive criticism and expert guidance to produce outstanding images.

The workshop is the brainchild of **Jay Dickman**, a Pulitzer-Prize winning photographer and frequent photographer for such notable publications as *National Geographic*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *Traveler Overseas* and 15 of the *Day in the Life of* series books. He and his wife, Becky, produce and run the workshops, and his charismatic exuberance sets the tone for the event, instilling a sense of community among the participants, along with the confidence that everyone is capable of taking great pictures if only they apply a few simple rules ... and then break them!



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At top, Firstlight founder Jay Dickman, Douglas Stevenson of *DIGITAL Photographer*, and Firstlight instructor and Adobe Certified Photoshop Expert, Jay Kinghorn, check print quality from an HP 8750 printer before the gallery show. Above is Hooper Island on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.



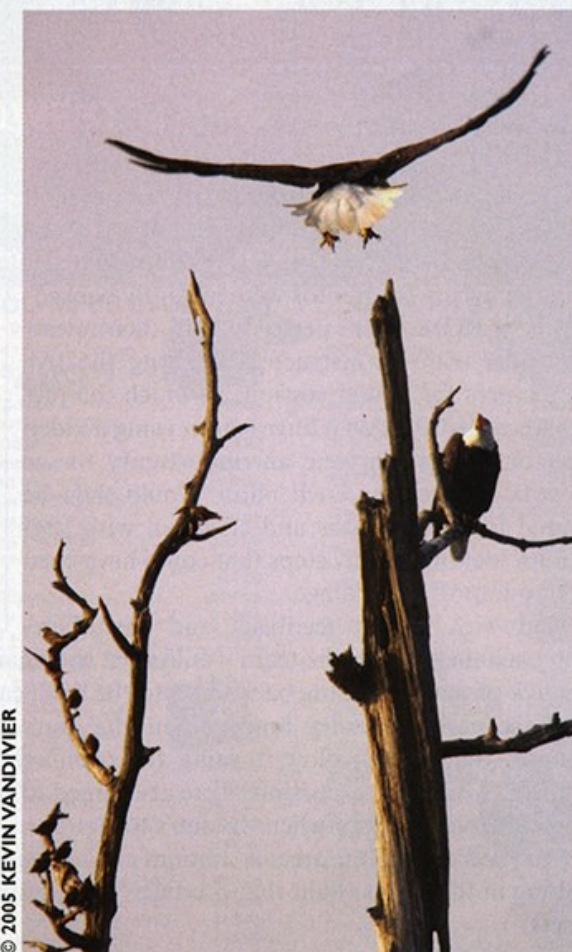
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On a "waterman's" boat, the deckdog checks out a fish. A waterman is to the Eastern Shore what the cowboy is to the American West.



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Patrons enjoy a chat in a Cambridge, MD, diner.



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In this amazing photo, a bald eagle on the Chesapeake Bay returns to its nest as its mate reacts.

Photography workshops have been around for quite some time, but digital has changed them completely. In the past, most photography workshops shot everything in black and white, the only way to process the film fast enough to see results by the next day. A contact sheet of thumbnail images was provided for review and used to select the images that would be turned into larger prints.

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PHOTO: JAY DICKMAN

A couple enjoy the week-ending Firstlight Workshops Chesapeake Bay gallery showing.

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In contrast, digital cameras today provide an instant review with full-color thumbnails on the camera's LCD screen. After a day of shooting, workshop participants would return to mission central, a loft above a boat shop overlooking a harbor, to download their images into the master computer, where the photos were instantly backed-up on CD-ROM. Each person would then review their shots with an instructor, selecting the five best pictures for a later session, in which the pictures were displayed on a huge screen using a video projector, giving everyone an opportunity to see the work of the day. Each photo would then be admired for its strengths and critiqued with suggestions, identifying any steps that could have been made to improve the image.

Filled with instant feedback and encouragement, each member of the team would then rise again at the crack of dawn, heading back out into the field, catching those early morning hours when the sun's light emanates that golden glow, turning the ordinary into beautiful. Afternoon excursions were also timed to catch the "magic hour," again when the sun's low angle causes light to pass through a greater amount of atmosphere, resulting in the golden light that produces such dramatic sunsets.

4-STAR INSTRUCTORS

The real heart of FirstLight Workshops is the time spent with instructors. By spreading the workshop out over five days, one has the opportunity to have their pictures critiqued by all of the instructors, receiving a different perspective from each one. In addition to Dickman,

PHOTO: RAY JOHNSON



This image of a graveyard on Chesapeake Bay's Hooper Island evoked the response of a local who lives close to the scene: "I drive by this every day, and I never saw this before...this is beautiful, I'll always look at it differently."

you can also spend one-on-one time with photographers like **John Isaac**, who spent 20 years as a lead photographer for the United Nations. His work carried Isaac to the many hot spots and conflicts all around the world, and his assignments were often both dangerous and heart wrenching. His gentle manner always emphasizes the positive, recognizing your strong points as a way to identify the areas in your shots that need improvement.

Bert Fox is a photo editor for *National Geographic* and has been recognized five times as "Magazine Picture Editor of the Year" in the University of Missouri's annual Picture of the Year competition. Affectionately nicknamed by one student as the "Terminator" for his no-holds-barred, straightforward commentary, Fox wastes no time. You are called on camera shake, out-of-level horizons, poor composition and anything else that will cause an image to be rejected. *National Geographic* photographers shoot and deliver all images in the RAW format, so that no external processing has been applied. This forces the photographer to work extra hard to get everything right the first time. However, Fox is quick to point out that even a pro must shoot several thousand photos to acquire eight to 10 that were suitable for publication.

Although **Jay Kinghorn** is an experienced photographer, his expertise is in RGB imaging, applied through Adobe Photoshop. After each student had chosen five images with an instructor, they were passed on to Kinghorn, who would apply his magic. It is fascinating to watch his systematic approach, taking good photos with color correction, dodging and burning, making the photos look as the photographer had envisioned. He led several instructional workshops, guiding the group step by step through the process of enhancing images, one of the primary highlights of the week.

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PHOTO: HUMBERTO GUGLIEMINA



A combine works the fields along the Chesapeake Bay.

THE RIGHT GEAR

Both Olympus and Hewlett-Packard were primary sponsors for the workshop, supplying not just equipment, but on-the-ground experts that knew their products intimately. Each workshop participant had access to Olympus E-1 DSLRs and a broad assortment of Olympus lenses. This was the perfect opportunity to try out a \$7,000 high-power 300mm lens (and with Olympus' lens factor, this is the equivalent of a 600mm lens in 35mm talk) with a 1.4X extender, the tools you need for shooting the abundant wildlife residing in the marshes of the country's largest estuary. It was a wise move for Olympus. Once you have a taste of the speed and flexibility of a DSLR, it's hard to go back. (By the way, Dickman, Fox and Isaac are all Olympus Visionaries, a partnership Olympus maintains with some of America's best professional photographers, both to highlight the quality of Olympus equipment and to receive feedback and input from the photographic community.)

From each student's top five, one or two images were printed on large format paper for an exhibition held on Friday evening at a local gallery that was open to the public. The quality of the images captured by the E-1 was brought to life by HP's 8750 and DesignJet 130 printers.

The HP 8750 (\$499 list) uses a 9-ink system based in three cartridges. In addition to standard CMYK and black inks, the ink formula includes two additional shades of gray, plus a light cyan, light magenta and a special shade of blue, all designed to provide the widest

PHOTO: JIM STARR



A boat's early morning reflection signals another day on the Chesapeake Bay.

range of color shading possible. The 8750 prints on special HP glossy or satin photo paper, available in sizes up to 13x19 inches that are independently certified to resist fading for more than 100 years.

The DesignJet 130 (\$1,295 list) will accept paper from rolls in widths up to 24 inches wide for true gallery-sized images. Designed for professional photo services, it uses a 6-ink system with extra large cartridges. Unlike consumer and small office printers like the 8750, the 130 uses long hoses that transfer the inks from the cartridges to the separate print heads. Special ink formulas are used to prevent the hoses from clogging, and the system is designed for regular commercial use. This is the same printer used by such prestigious names as the Ansel Adams Gallery Workshop, a testament to its quality. The DesignJet 130 was used to produce 16x20-inch prints for the FirstLight Workshops gallery exhibition, and the students were allowed to take their images home when all was said and done.

THE PARTICIPANTS

People came from all around the country and beyond. Some were simply seeking to improve their skills while others were exploring the possibilities for a business for after retirement. One was a photojournalist for a big city newspaper, what you might call an advanced student. Virtually all were more than point-and-shoot picture takers. Dickman is upfront, stating that this is not a beginner's course, but one designed for people serious about their hobby—people with little or no formal training or education, who want an opportunity to take their skills to the next level. If you are passionate about photography, you'll feel right at home.

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Working since 4 a.m. on the Chesapeake Bay, a waterman pushes a basket full of fish to a holding area.

5 Tips For Taking Better Photographs

1. WORK IT

"So many people take one or two pictures and then move on to the next subject of interest. If you really want to capture a picture that succeeds at all levels, you have to increase your odds. When you take pictures of any subject, shoot at lots of different angles, bracket your exposures and experiment with different white balances. You've got the situation. You may find it necessary to shoot the same composition over and over until you catch, 'the peak moment,' where every detail comes together."

—Jay Dickman

2. EXAMINE THE EDGES

"We often get so caught up in the excitement of framing up the subject that we forget about the rest of the picture. Once you have the general composition in place, take the time to look around the edges. Is there any critical

portion of the subject that is cut off that will make the framing seem incomplete? Are there distractions that are intruding which can be kept out of view by zooming in a little more?"

—John Isaac

3. LOOK FOR THE DIFFERENCE

"When everything is same, the eye is drawn to the difference. If one color dominates, the viewer will be attracted to the color that is different. This can be used to focus the attention, establishing the subject. Build your composition around this."

—Bert Fox

4. AVOID BRIGHT CORNERS

"The eye is drawn to the brightest portion of the image. When you have a bright spot along the edge, the eye is drawn away from the main subject and led out of the frame."

—John Isaac

PHOTO: DOUGLAS STEVENSON



A worker takes in the Chesapeake Bay.

5. EXPLAIN THE PERSON

"When taking pictures of people, you want to look for that powerful gesture, the look or expression that explains the person. If the viewer is to feel that they know this person through the image, we must deliver their personality in the picture."

—Jay Dickman

THE GALLERY

The gallery showing was the perfect way to end the workshop. The students and instructors had made their presence known in the community, with the invasion of a small army of photographers ranging from far and wide seeking the images that defined life on the Chesapeake. Some went out on assignments, spending the day on boats with fishermen to document their work and life. Others explored the town, from the barbershop to the local diner. Resident photographer David Harp guided the participants with his intimate knowledge of who, what and where to go to capture the essence of the area. His personal gallery in town is a testament to following your dreams, while his pictures are an inspiration, clearly illustrating the limitless photo opportunities the area has to offer.

It was fascinating to watch the subjects of the photographs walk into the gallery exhibition. The images indeed had the air of a *National Geographic* feature and you could sense the swelling pride of the community as people walked past the pictures on the walls, usually not once, but twice. Pride was also evident in the participants. They had changed from dabblers to serious artists, each one fully realizing that they had the talent and the potential to take great photographs.

In addition to the gallery exhibition, each student's work will also be used to produce a special *FirstLight*

Magazine, featuring the Chesapeake. This is the third such endeavor by Dickman and FirstLight, with two previous excursions and subsequent magazines, the first highlighting a small town in the French countryside and another based in Scotland. If these previous publications are any sign of what's to come, the Chesapeake periodical will be a real beauty.

NEXT UP — WYOMING

If you think you could benefit from this type of inspiration, you just might consider signing up for the next FirstLight Workshop, scheduled for the full week of July 4, 2006, in Dubois, WY. Be prepared for cowboys and purple mountains' majesty. ■

LINKS

- HP — 800-752-0900; www.hp.com
- Olympus — 800-645-8160; www.olympusamerica.com
- FirstLight Workshops — 877-448-0411; www.firstlightworkshops.com
- Jay Dickman — www.firstlightworkshops.com
- Perfect Digital Photography — <http://books.mcgraw-hill.com>
- John Isaac — www.johnisaac.com
- Jay Kinghorn — www.digitaldaysphoto.com
- David Harp — www.davidharpphotography.com