

IN CONVERSATION WITH
The Launsteins

Living in one of North America's greatest and most pristine natural havens, a Canadian family is making a name for itself as a generation-spanning wildlife collective to be reckoned with. To the Launsteins, it just comes naturally...

Interview by Nick Smith



opposite page A North American porcupine strikes a pose as it pauses to make sure its route to the forest is safe – by Jenaya.
above A red fox curls up for a long winter's nap, using a cabin as a windbreak in Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta, Canada – by John.

If there were one word to describe what we do, why we do it and how we go about what we do, it would be passion.' John Launstein, celebrated Canadian wildlife photographer, is describing not his work, but that of his family. For those who think that getting out into the wild and recording nature's bounty with the camera is a solitary business, prepare to be, if not surprised, then certainly inspired by the portfolio of a family that shoots as a collective to produce some of the highest quality Canadian wildlife photography you can see today.

John is the grand patriarch of the Launstein dynasty, a descriptor he accepts with characteristic Canadian modesty and good humour. His principal proteges are daughter Jenaya and son Josiah. This central core of the collective is supported by his wife Melanie, and their other daughter Charis, along with a cast of Newfoundland dogs, St Bernard's, hedgehogs, cats and rabbits. Together they form a powerful photographic unit that seems to be greater than the sum of its individual parts. 'We are all animal and wildlife fanatics,' says John. 'We just love wildlife and the wilderness. When you really love an environment like this, you just want to be out there more. When it comes to the

moment you look through the lens, in a place like this you just have to care about the image.'

The Launsteins are located in south-western Alberta, not far from the town of Pincher Creek and the Waterton Lakes National Park. Their manifesto says that they are committed to capturing the beauty and behaviour of the wildlife of Western Canada and along the Rocky Mountains, as well as the challenges they face living in this sometimes-harsh environment. Jenaya, who is 18, says she hopes her photography will encourage people to care 'more about the animals I have the privilege of photographing.'

When you scroll through the family's photos, you can't but wonder where such uniformity of talent comes from. 'I get asked this a lot,' says John. 'People think it might be a matter of genetics,' he says before describing how he comes from an artistic family: his mother taught art, while his father had amateur photographic ambitions. Following in their footsteps, John has been working with visual media ever since he can remember: 'I guess I was something of a forerunner to my kids.' By the time Jenaya was ten years old, all she wanted to do 'was take pictures of the scenery and the wildlife, and so we used to take drives out into the mountains.

Then she said she wanted to become a wildlife photographer.' She has certainly lived up to her ambition in the intervening eight years: a roll call of her success in terms of awards would be the envy of any photographer who ever wielded a camera for a couple of decades.

Jenaya understandably gets her passion for the great outdoors from John, reiterating that she knew early on that this was where her artistic path lay. Younger brother Josiah, who is 10, confirms this, saying: 'my family really likes being in nature and, of course, we are always looking for wildlife when we are out! My dad has been taking me into the backcountry for as long as I can remember.' All John's children live an idyllic life, not least because they are home-schooled. This gives them the flexibility to respond to the conditions and the seasons without being too constrained by clocks and conventions.

But before anyone thinks that this seems a little too good to be true, it has to be said that the Launsteins are a conventional family in at least one sense. Elder sibling Jenaya thinks that the strong pulse of competition that beats within the family has a positive effect on her. 'My little brother and I argue sometimes about which lenses to use.' But she also thinks that the



opposite page Seven geese (top right) wing their way through stormy skies above a peak in Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta, Canada – by John.
above An aggressive Canada goose launches from the water to protect its territory from an approaching goose – by Josiah.
below A Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep ram in Jasper National Park, Alberta, Canada – by Josiah.





above A great grey owl perches along the edge of an aspen forest while hunting the surrounding meadow – by John.
below Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep ram atop a rocky outcrop in Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta, Canada – by Jenaya.
opposite page A great grey owllet resting in the lush spring grass after one of its first flying lessons – by Jenaya.





above A Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep ram courts an ewe during the annual rut near Kootenay National Park in British Columbia, Canada – by Josiah.

closeness of family proximity creates an atmosphere of encouragement and support. ‘It’s good to have lots of extra eyes to spot the critters when we are out together.’

Having your kids follow in your footsteps can be a double-edged sword, a statement John agrees with wholeheartedly. ‘On the one hand, I tend to think that I couldn’t be happier seeing them fulfilling their dream. But on the other, I think: “please choose something that you can make a living at!” Of all the genres you could pick... Of course, we are extremely supportive, but with an element of realism mixed in there too. My wife and I encourage their passion for photography as a hobby. But you know, when a 10-year-old tells you what they want to do with their life, you don’t necessarily assume that they are going to carry it through.’

None of the above would be anything more than a folksy family fireside yarn were it not for the fact that the resulting photography is of uniformly top-level professional standard. Those of us with kids will know how easy it is to have a disproportionate sense of their achievements. But this really is a case where third-party endorsements confirm the facts, usually in the form of competition placing, inclusions in art galleries, publication in respected journals and

print sales. So has any of this success surprised John? ‘For sure. I get giddy looking at the images on the back of their cameras. It’s incredible really. After we’ve been out for the day, we’ll be driving back and they’ll be telling me about what they’ve shot. And then when we go and get a bite to eat, I’ll look at this stuff and think, “are you kidding me?”’ John then describes Jenaya’s landmark porcupine image that is currently in the Smithsonian in Washington DC.

But it’s not just the imagery that fires the imagination: the Launsteins are a collective of committed conservationists, with Jenaya in particular voicing strong opinions about the value of her work as a force for environmental good. ‘I think that by getting my photos out there, it might just make people want to see those animals and landscapes for themselves and want to protect them. The Khutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary in British Columbia is a good example. It’s a protected area and so many people care strongly about it and want to keep it protected.’ She goes on to describe her excitement at some of her favourite local backcountry recently falling under the jurisdiction of the Castle Wilderness Area. ‘I definitely think that the photos coming from there have shown people how special a place it is.’

In his role as paternal protector, John – who admits to getting more of thrill from photographing his kids at work than actually photographing the wildlife itself – agrees that an outdoor life isn’t for the faint-hearted. Jenaya’s view is full of the headlong enthusiasm of youth: ‘My dream home is a log cabin in the middle of the wilderness, surrounded by wildlife and with a camera in hand.’ Josiah agrees, saying that for him the real motivating force is the fact that he gets to spend all his time out in the forests and the mountains. ‘This winter my Dad and I camped in the snow in our truck for a week while photographing the annual bighorn sheep rut. You can’t beat finishing a day in the field with a campfire and roasted marshmallows.’

But all photographers, by the nature of what they do, eventually have to go home, shut the door and peer into their computer screens. I wonder how much work gets done by the Launsteins in post-production. Jenaya concentrates on bringing colours back to life from the Raw files, while Josiah specialises in picture selection, while ensuring he’s got the basics right.

Make a note of the Launsteins’ names. You’re going to be hearing a lot more from them. *For more of their work, visit launsteinimagery.com*