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Mankato native growing reputation as wildlife photographer Harlow best known for work of eagle photography.

There's been a lot of water beneath the bridge since Mark Harlow graduated from Mankato East High School way back when.

In the ensuing decades, Harlow, the son of Roger and Betty Harlow, has been a sheet metal worker, construction worker, graphic communication and design, color separation, printing industry sales and consulting for over two decades, all with a measure of success.

During his graphics communications career, he oversaw the production of most of famed wildlife artist Les Kouba's prints from 1987 until Kouba's death in 1995.

(And no, you can't lay the blame on Harlow for the fading problems in Kouba's famed and now valuable "Heading for Shelter" pheasant prints. "That was before my time," Harlow said.)

There was a serious car accident, a career change, a little soul searching about where he had been, where he wanted to go.

And finally, there were the swans.

"I was sitting out on a bucket on the ice, fishing on Shingobee Bay on Leech Lake in 2004 and saw these tundra swans land," he said.

The sight of them was so striking that he was inspired to hustle back to a friend's house where he had left a spankin' new digital camera, never used and still in the factory-sealed box, that he had bought several months earlier.

Although he had taken photography classes at East High School, digital photography was something new. "I had never used a digital camera, it was like 'what's a memory card?' and 'you have to plug this thing in?'," he recalled.

By the time he returned to the lake, the tundra swans had vanished. But he doggedly waited, hoping they might return. His persistence was rewarded when the pair returned and he managed to make a single photograph of them.

His first digital photo — of the swans — turned out to be a favorite of his mother, Betty, whose health was failing.

"Mom just fell in love with it — she said 'promise me you'll do something with your photography this time,'" he said. "You've always had a gift for it and you ought to share it."

"I had taken the photography classes at East and had a talent for it but I always put the prints away in a drawer when they were done."

When his mother passed away a short time later, he weighed his options.

He still had the print sales business, White Pine Graphics, that he was running out of Walker. But with his mother's admonition fresh in his mind, he began to dabble in wildlife and scenic photography part-time.

By 2008, the lure of the lens completely won out. He made the plunge into photography full time, a decision that meant going from earning six figures to significantly less than that. "I'm not getting rich by any means," he admits.

Two years later, he has quietly been building recognition and a reputation as an accomplished outdoor photographer. In addition to opening a retail gallery to display his work, he has designed several Web sites to showcase his work on line.

Unlike many wildlife photographers who augment their print sales with sales to magazines, he prefers to concentrate on the fine art market where his background in graphic arts and printing serves him and his customers well.

He estimates that nowadays, he spends about 2/3s of the year on the road shooting. His Toyota pick-up, which has some 440,000 clicks on it, has taken him throughout the Midwest and western states, even Alaska, to pursue his photographic passion.

His remarkable collection of outdoor images include scenics, grizzlies, fox, coyotes, wild mustangs, and eagles — especially eagles.

His reputation as an eagle photographer has made him a regular presenter at the National Eagle Center at Wabasha. He also has been featured on a segment of Kent Hrbek's outdoor program.

Once a serious hunter, he admits that stalking wildlife up close with a camera has turned him into a bit of a softy. "My buddies call me the tree hugger now," he said.



Harlow's photographs of bald eagles have made him a popular speaker at the National Eagle Center in Wabasha.



A Harlow photograph captures a grizzly bear pouncing on a salmon.

Harlow's work can be viewed at the following Web sites: www:MarkjHarlow.com, www.WildMustangSite.com, NatureInBlackandWhite.com, and EagleLovers.com.