



Rio from the Sky

Aerial pictures showcase a different look at the nation's fourth longest river.

Pictures by photographer and pilot Adriel Heisey show the Rio Grande from its headwaters in Colorado, through New Mexico to its mouth in Texas. *The Rio Grande: An Eagle's View* is published by WildEarth Guardians, a conservationist organization that works to protect habitats and species in New Mexico and the Southwest. Along with the aerial photographs, the book features articles and essays by Robert Redford, Steve McDowell, Senator Tom Udall and WildEarth Guardians Executive Director, John Horning.

ATM: What is your background as a photographer?

Heisey: I started shooting seriously at the end of high school—when I bought my first single lens reflex camera. I had already taken flying lessons by that point—I got my student pilot license at age 16—and since the reason I wanted to fly was to SEE MORE, using the camera in the air was a natural move. When I began to fly professionally at age 21, my camera was a constant companion. Learning to record on film what I was seeing and feeling in the air was a years-long process of working to systematically refine what worked and avoid what didn't. I'm completely self-taught in this way.

When I moved to Arizona at age 26 and began flying on the Navajo Nation, my photography leaped to a new level. Within four years I decided to build my own plane to use for shooting—no more

Adriel Heisey, an aerial photographer, has compiled his latest photos in *The Rio Grande: An Eagle's View*.



courtesy photo



The Rio Grande: An Eagle's View

Photographs by Adriel Heisey
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grabbing shots out the window of the planes I flew professionally! After three years of exploring the Four Corners landscape with my own plane and camera, I began to have work published in regional magazines, and after a pivotal workshop in Santa Fe with Sam Abell, my photographs ended up in *National Geographic Magazine*. I had the cover story of the September 1996 issue. After that came more magazine features, assignments, exhibitions, and books—all aerial photography. *The Rio Grande: An Eagle's View* is my fourth book.

ATM: How long did it take to get all the photos?

Heisey: Photography for the book began in February 2001 and ended this past February—ten years. Not all that time was spent shooting, of course. There were a number of factors that prolonged the photography: we wanted to show the river in all the seasons, funding was sometimes a limitation, and later we added the lower two-thirds of the river to the project. And during much of the project I had a full time job as a pilot.

ATM: How many photos did you take?

Heisey: I estimate around 35,000 exposures. The edit pool was about 2,500, and there are 185 images in the book. I spent far more time dealing with the photos—processing, organizing, cataloging, editing and prepping—than I did taking them.

ATM: How did you take the photographs? What equipment did you use?

Heisey: Every photograph is taken from the air. I fly a very small and lightweight airplane and do the shooting myself, composing through the camera viewfinder at my eye just the way you would walking around on the ground—no remote mounts, controls, or monitors. I slow the plane down to about 35 or 40 mph and slowly circle the subject I'm working. This gives me time to think about what I'm seeing, and I have time to compose my images rather precisely. How do I fly the plane while doing this? It's not as difficult as you might think. First, the plane is quite stable on its own, and things like throttle and trim settings—fine adjustments to the controls—can be set for sustained operation without constant attention. Second, I strap the control stick to my right knee and maneuver the plane, when necessary, simply by moving my leg around. Third, all my senses are keenly tuned to my environment, and although I may have one eye behind the viewfinder, I have a whole-body awareness of my situation. As a professional pilot with over 10,000 hours of flight time, and several thousand spent making photographs in the air, I find that minding the airplane while I work with the camera comes quite naturally.

ATM: How is photographing from the air different than on the ground?

Heisey: Technically, the major challenge is that in the air I'm always moving. This means that the

most likely problem is blurred photos, and there are a number of techniques that help mitigate this, including the use of the gyros. Also, unlike with many kinds of photography on the ground, I have absolutely no way of controlling the lighting of my subjects. My strategies in this regard are all about choice of perspective and choice of moment. This means that I am a perpetual student of landforms, weather, seasonal changes, and natural light—and frightfully single-minded about getting airborne in time to be on station for the best light! Many are the mornings that I awakened at 3:30, took off in total darkness, and loitered like a hungry vulture as dawn light gradually flooded the land beneath me. My entire life is organized around those moments.

Aesthetically, aerial photography is an artist's dream. It's an inherently unfamiliar way of seeing the world, so almost everything you see is interesting to the eye. And a virtually infinite variety of perspectives are available because you can move freely in space. So actually, the challenge is to learn how to zero in on what is truly the most compelling to your own aesthetic, or for the purpose of your mission. It's important to always be open to the kaleidoscope of earth and sky unfolding around you as you fly, and yet to discipline yourself to work carefully on your chosen subjects. And then of course there is context. What is the setting of that which you thought you knew? From the air, this is almost always some degree of revelation, and so this is perhaps the most powerful aspect of the aerial perspective.

ATM: What is your favorite photo in the book?

Heisey: I'm loathe to choose a favorite, because they each have their own story and role. But I would draw attention to the photo of Antelope Park on page 12 of the book. I took it after sunset, maneuvering myself to an altitude and distance where the bright evening sky reflected off the river's surface and accentuated its form. I chose a focal length that framed the river—but nothing more—within the confines of the flat valley floor that holds the meanders. There's the dimmest suggestion of the shadowed landscape, and in the lower right is a stretch of highway, which dispels any notion of pristine wilderness and gives the viewer both perspective and entrée into the scene. I think it's a good example of the unique qualities an aerial photograph can evoke, and it also plays with a paradox at the heart of some of the most compelling aerial photographs: a view that is at the same time both remote and intimate.

WildEarth Guardians Executive Director John Horning is a contributing author to *The Rio Grande: An Eagle's View*.

ATM: Tell me a little bit about the work you have done to protect the Rio Grande.

Horning: Our work to protect the Rio Grande is almost entirely about water—mostly quantity but

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the quality of the water as well. Our work began in 1996 when more than 60 miles of the river went completely dry as irrigators diverted 100 percent of the river's flow at San Acacia Diversion Dam just north of Socorro. As a result more than 10,000 Rio Grande silvery minnows, a species listed under the Endangered Species Act, perished. That event, with irrigation ditches running full to capacity, symbolized what we consider to be our greatest challenge: that the river doesn't have a right to its own water. So since then we've worked, largely in federal court with lawsuits under the Endangered Species Act, to change the way that the federal government, State of New Mexico and the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District manage water. We've had numerous legal victories along the way—and some failures too—that have resulted in changes in how water is managed in the Rio Grande. Water is managed more efficiently by most every party, to the river's benefit, and water is managed to mimic the natural hydrograph. That's a complicated way of saying that they try to have good peak flows and sustain minimum flows. This has resulted in benefits not only for the endangered species—primarily the Southwest willow flycatcher and the Rio Grande silvery minnow—but also for the more than 450 different species of wildlife that depend on the river from its headwaters all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico.

ATM: How can a book of photographs help in your efforts?

Horning: Photos can inspire a sense of awe, beauty and wonder in the natural world. Though they present the river as it is, some of the images remind us of how it once was and how it might once again exist if we care for it. The title of the essay that I wrote for the book is "Rio Reverence" and actually it comes from an essay by one of Aldo Leopold's children in which he muses about what type of thinking might result in more care for our rivers. Ultimately he argues that it is not more engineering and scientific training but rather reverence for what a river is, in all its complexity and beauty. Images that inspire us with the river's beauty can hopefully help us build a culture of reverence for the river. Not simply reverence for what it does for us but what it is: a living thing with a pulse of its own.

ATM: Why did you choose to show the river from the air and from its headwaters to the mouth?

Horning: Two of the most mythic aspects of any big, long river are its source and its mouth. Where it springs from the earth and where it becomes a part of a bigger water body are critical markers to understanding the river as a whole, living thing. One of the challenges of protecting and restoring a river is that we often see it fragmented, in parts, and we don't see it whole. The more we are able to see the river as it once flowed, uninterrupted,

along its nearly 1,900 mile course, the more likely we are to respect and even then try to keep it whole. We debated not only photographing some subset of the river or event presenting the river by its different characteristics--canyons, wetlands, forests etc. Ultimately we decided not to fragment it into its component parts.

I was looking at a copy of *National Geographic*, which included a cover story/photo essay from September 1996 by Adriel entitled "Flight Over Four Corners." The issue was my introduction to Adriel. The story included an image of the stream and cottonwoods in Canyon de Chelly. That image captured the fragility and beauty of a stream in ways that I had never seen. The aerial view is especially powerful in capturing rivers and streams in an arid landscape because you can see that rivers are this little thin green line of vegetation—this artery of life in an otherwise arid land. Only the aerial perspective allows the viewer to see how precious and fragile a river in an arid land is.

ATM: What are some of the challenges that the Rio Grande faces?

Horning: So many challenges. The biggest challenge is the current and growing demands for its precious and limited water supplies—whether from cities or farms. A river is not a river without water and the Rio Grande, more so than any other large river in our country, is being stressed under the weight of all of these demands. Water is diverted from up near its headwaters in the San Luis Valley, in the Middle Rio Grande valley of New Mexico, in southern New Mexico and then many, many times again and again all the way down to the Gulf. I like to say that the Rio Grande is a river that doesn't have a right to its own waters. Essentially what that means is that cities, towns, farmers, irrigation districts, and industries own more water than actually flows in the river. What flows in the river does so on its way to someone else who owns the water. The river doesn't have a secure and reliable flow to sustain itself. In the drier times that we are moving into, this problem is likely to worsen.

ATM: What are some things that people can do to help preserve the river and the Bosque?

Horning: Get involved by asking city, state and federal leaders what it is they're doing to support a living Rio Grande. Supporting the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act, as both of these federal laws have been critical in catalyzing changes that help to protect the Rio Grande. Support the Albuquerque Bernalillo Water Utility Authority's "Living River Fund" by donating \$1 per month on your monthly water bill to acquire water for the river. It's a small step but if everyone did it would send a powerful message to our leaders that we want water in the Rio Grande. Create a new relationship with the river or deepen an existing one. Get out on the river. Float it, hike it, walk along it. Participate in restoration efforts—whether by

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removing salt cedar/tamarisk or planting native vegetation. Appreciate what a tremendous asset it is. People will only fight for what they care about, and in order to care about the river it can't be an abstraction. Revere it like the beautiful, living thing that it is.