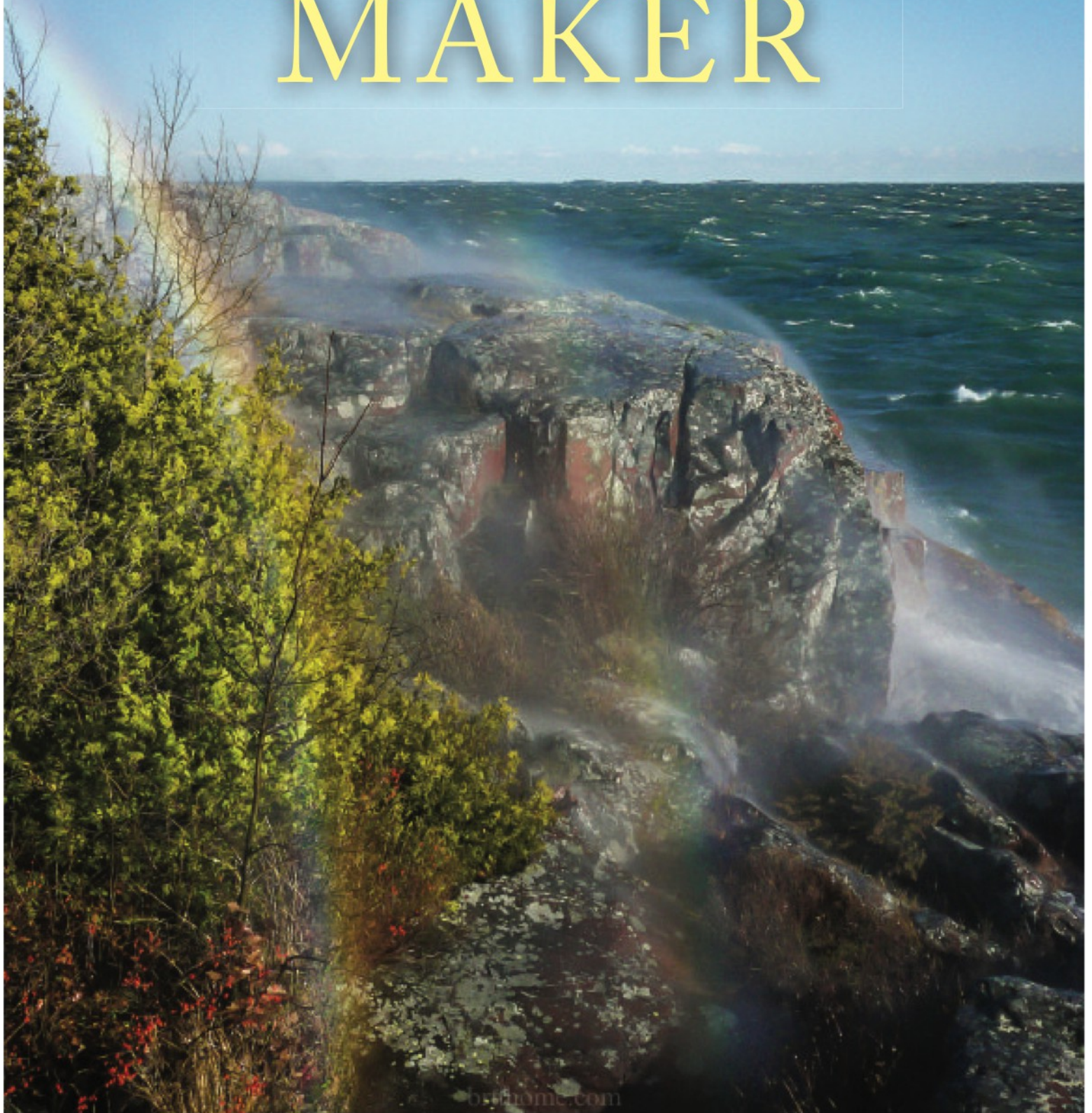


LIVE WELL

# *The* PICTURE MAKER



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**Instead of taking photos, Tom Semadeni says he makes pictures that let viewers be engaged by scenes of the natural world that engaged him. After flying fighter jets for NATO and co-founding Sudbury's Science North and Cambrian College, the picture maker now delights in finding subjects along the back roads near Britt.**

STORY BY PATTI VIPOND | PHOTOS BY TOM SEMADENI

**T**hough once a cause for concern, the sight of a car parked on the wrong side of a lonely stretch of road near the village of Britt no longer worries local OPP officers. They know Tom Semadeni has found something interesting to photograph in the ditch, the forest fringe or up in the trees.

However, things were not initially so sanguine between the self-described 'picture maker' and the neighbourhood constabulary.

"I will pull over to the left side of the road and put on the flashers if there is a beaver swimming in a ditch or a bird singing in a bush," says Britt resident Semadeni, with a smile. "About two years ago, I was coming back from Point au Baril to Byng Inlet and the Magnetawan Reserve. We had just had a nice snowfall and every once in a while the sun would shine through big blobs of snow.

"I pulled over, took four or five photos and continued on. When I stopped again,

I saw this dark car stop beside me. It was a cop. He said, 'So, what are you doing?' I told him I was making photographs. He said, 'I'm so relieved. I thought I was following a drunk driving from one side of the road to the other.'

"You meet the neatest people when you are parked on the wrong side of the road."

Prior to taking up photography, Semadeni built an impressive CV. Born and raised on a farm in British Columbia, he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), who sponsored his education in engineering at the University of British Columbia. After flying RCAF fighter jets for NATO in Europe, Semadeni flew supersonic interceptors in Canada for a few years. The engineering physicist entered teaching after marrying and starting a family. After co-founding Cambrian College in Sudbury, Semadeni was its dean of Engineering, Technology and Health Sciences for many years.

As well, Semadeni sat on the board that founded and built Science North, Sudbury's innovative science centre. The founders dared to make science something to be





experienced by each visitor personally. For 10 years, Semadeni developed the centre's unique science program before retiring to the former port, sawmill and railway town of Britt. A self-described obsessive learner, Semadeni designed the Science North program to encourage the development of citizen scientists who wanted to learn the relation of science and technology to their own lives. Coaches called 'bluecoats' helped visitors investigate whatever intrigued them.

"Writers called Science North the 'Science Centre of the Third Kind,'" recalls Semadeni. "The first kind is like a museum of natural history with things labelled with Latin names. The second type is Newton's hands-on department store like the Ontario Science Centre. The third kind is a public laboratory like Science North. We did real science with seismographs, animals and telescopes. Visitors were activated to look, touch, listen and be engaged with their environment. Our model was used in Frank Oppenheimer's Exploratorium in San Francisco as well as in Paris, France; Helsinki, Finland, and three science centres in China."

Semadeni's method of composing pictures is still influenced by his early flight training. Taught as a fighter pilot to look into the sky instead of at it, he looks through the camera's viewfinder and into the scene. His eye scans the far horizon and then keeps moving to integrate all available information.

"In 1967, my flight instructor and I were walking out to an airplane on a beautiful day with nice puffy clouds," recalls Semadeni. "I said, 'Look at those beautiful clouds.' He stopped me immediately and said, 'Semadeni, that's the last time I want to hear you say that. Fighter pilots do not look at the sky. They look into the sky and never fixate on any one spot.'"

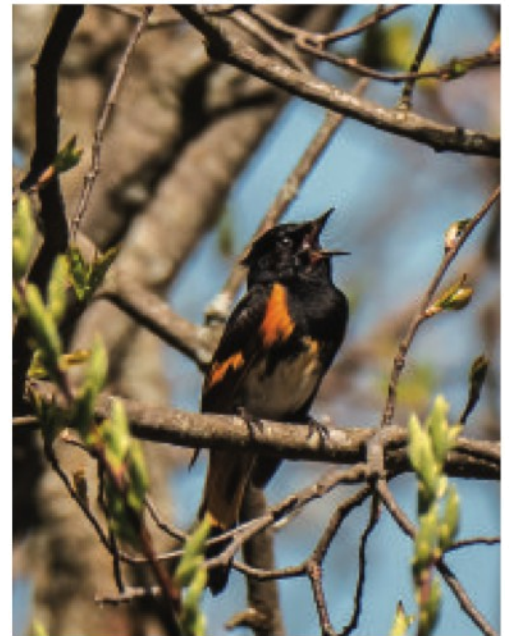
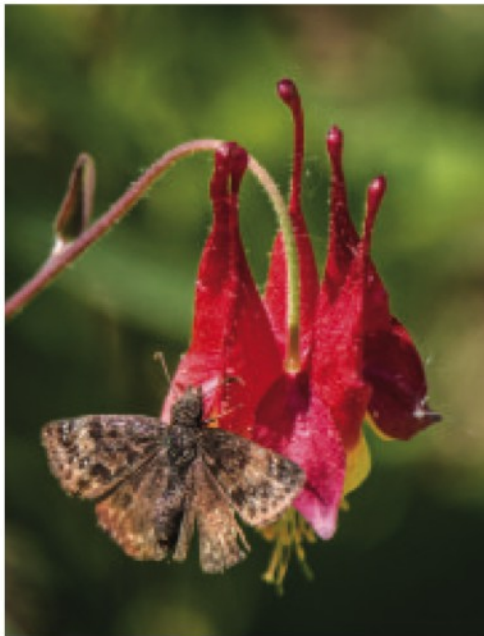
Though many of Semadeni's images of landscapes, flora and fauna appear to have been taken in undisturbed countryside, the majority were shot from inside his car using his patented left side parking technique. This method lets him get closer to animals and birds than on foot. He has an unerring eye for finding the unexpected in ditches and on roadsides.



"I've had bears come right up to the side of the car in April when they are still pretty goofy," he says. "I've been able to get a close up of a bear's nose."

Semadeni uses Panasonic, Olympus, Leica and Voigtländer lens on his mirrorless Micro Four Thirds Panasonic cameras. He exposes raw files and converts them into images using Lightroom on a MacBook Pro laptop.

"The mirrorless Panasonic cameras have a smaller sensor than the big DSLR cameras and so are much lighter," explains Semadeni. "These cameras also have very good stabilization, so I never have to use a tripod. Their focusing and exposure systems are extremely good."



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As a scientist and a picture maker, Semadeni has noticed the effect of climate change on the behaviour of migratory birds and native bugs.

"In the fall, many insects lay eggs in the bud clusters on deciduous trees as the leaves drop," explains Semadeni. "When the temperature gets above zero in April, the eggs hatch and the larvae, or bud worms, start eating the buds. Birds coming back from the south follow the greening of the trees. As buds break open, they glean the larvae and clean our trees and shrubs. As long as the birds arrive when the bugs are hatching, the trees are well protected.

"Last year, the leaves on the cherry trees, willows and poplars were damaged. I realized it was abnormally warm last April, so the bugs hatched before the birds arrived and ate more of the leaves. Birds migrate according to the length of day, so they can't adapt to a quickly moving climate change."

Lewis J. Clark, former head of the Department of Chemistry at the University of Victoria and a renowned photographer, introduced Semadeni to photography and its connection to nature. In his book *Wildflowers of the Pacific Northwest*, Clark said the best way to develop public interest in conservation and ecology is to familiarize them with plant and animal life. On hikes with Clark, Semadeni got hooked on learning about and photographing the natural environment.

When friends noticed his growing interest in photography, they decided to do something about it. They gave him a picture of a nice camera and a couple of hundred dollars in a jar.



"They told me to get my butt in gear, get myself a good camera and use it," laughs Semadeni. "That's what got me going 10 years ago."

Without the need to sell his photographs, Semadeni has the freedom to make pictures that inspire him instead of shooting what others want to see. However, he is pleased to share his creations with local groups at libraries, seniors' homes and provincial parks.

"I work hard to understand what engages me to take a picture," he explains. "After a while, it becomes intuitive. When I put the photo on the computer and play with it, I can see what turned my crank. Then I try to figure out a way of sharing that."

Currently, Semadeni is creating an installation of about 25 nature photos for the Britt nursing station. When the station asked if they could buy his photos he said no, but offered to donate finished prints. Local artists will gather to help Semadeni mount the photos that he hopes will give cheer to people waiting to see the nurse practitioner.

"People at a nursing station are normally under some sort of stress because of their health or the health of a loved one," says Semadeni, who has four grown children. "If they are going to look at pictures, it would be nice to see familiar things. The photos are local, but seen through different eyes.

"For example, I like the texture of

shooting in a snowstorm. I like trying to capture the patina, the negligée effect of looking through flowing snow. It's fun to use my pictures in a way that will give some delight, excitement and engagement to people. Hopefully, they will be transported from their situation. A bottom row of pictures will be at kids' eye level. That's where I'll put the chipmunks, bear cubs and birds to give them something they can relate to."

Semadeni is also aware that his photos have inspired seniors and others who may be tempted to stay inside to go outdoors, look around and listen. Through his website's blog, people have thanked him for helping them to get outdoors and see their environment again.

"For older people, it's really important to engage their visual system, keep themselves interested and not just watch the four walls or the television," says Semadeni. "People who have thanked me for encouraging them to get out and look for butterflies and birds."

Perhaps people's innate longing to engage with the beauty and liveliness of nature is what Semadeni captures most from the left-hand side of those country roads.

"You don't have to go out on the bay or hike through the bush," he says. "Just stop for a minute and look for the beauty that is already in your own backyard or waiting to be seen across the road." 🌿

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*For more, see Semadeni's 'Brthome's Blog – photos, prose, prattle and possibilities,' at [www.brthome.com](http://www.brthome.com).*