

Where Do You Fit In?

A wildlife doc producer discusses how to find your calling as a videographer

BY LANCE MILBRAND

above:
The author (right) shoots a sunken Japanese Zero plane for CBS's "Survivor."

inset:
Lance Milbrand with his video gear at the start of production for the National Geographic Channel's "Ultimate Explorer: Island Castaway." The filmmaker spent 41 days in self-imposed exile on Clipperton Island, an uninhabited coral atoll in the Eastern Pacific off the coast of Acapulco, Mexico.



JOHN ANDERSON

Creating your own niche is not an accident—it's a conscious decision based on lifestyle, drive, and a bit of luck. I never knew that all those mornings swimming offshore as a kid in Ft. Lauderdale—when Mr. Barracuda, a healthy five-foot specimen with a full set of teeth, would chase me from one reef to the next, following me all the way back to the water's edge—held a larger purpose. Mr. Barracuda taught me a healthy respect for the sea, which eventually led me to underwater filmmaking. My walks along Ft. Lauderdale's canals—looking for turtles, spiders, and alligators in the swamp—trained me to see the whole picture and led me to become a wetland specialist in California. My passion for nature and outdoor-life experiences transformed itself into an area of expertise: creating videos in the outdoors. Today, I am a natural history filmmaker.



If you're like most videographers, your career can be a series of roller coaster rides, with high highs and low, low lows. During the highs, you've paid for brand new gear, you've covered your mortgage, and you never dip below \$20 on your Starbucks card. You are so busy that you're asking clients if they can postpone their shoot or delay their edit—

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left: Milbrand checks out a California sea lion.

right: Even when filming only tumbleweeds, protective clothing and safety gear is a must in the field.

or you're passing off work to your friends. During the low times, you check an empty e-mail box 20 times a day and dig deep into your car seat for spare coffee money. Regardless of your niche, you will experience both worlds if you stay in the business long enough.

Getting started

Once you've identified your niche, consider the cost of everything you will need to tell your story.

Obviously you'll need camera equipment and editing gear—but what do you have to buy, and what can you rent? Identify the ancillary items you will use time and again (for example, if you are a technical scuba diver, a rebreather). Perhaps you can pass one-time purchases on to your customer (if, say, the equipment could be destroyed during the shoot). In all likelihood, you will travel to at least a dozen stores to purchase odds and ends for your specialty.

Equipment modifications take time, expertise, and imagination. Oftentimes these modifications need tweaking in the field before they can be of real use to your production. You always want to try newly modified gear before you're using it on the clock—especially if a client is looking over your

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PHOTOS BY RICHARD HERRMANN

shoulder. Plan your modifications well in advance of your shoot date, or you will be forced to use a piece of gear off the shelf. In any case, be creative not only in how you use your equipment but also in how you make it pay for itself.

Most jobs require some type of safety gear. When I work in the wetlands, I wear hard-toed hiking boots, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, a fluorescent safety vest and a hat to protect myself from the sun. I bring a lot of drinking water. When I work near heavy machinery in the wetlands, a hard hat is mandatory and communication with the heavy equipment operator is essential. Safety equipment helps to create a safe work environment, but nothing takes the place of practice and repetition.

In addition, make sure to set time and money aside for any special training or certification that you'll need to work in your field.

Understanding the big picture

Your professional niche develops into a good portion of your life, so it should be clear, focused, and direct.

As a specialty videographer, you must be able to provide intimate details about your subject; after all, storytelling is what you get paid to do. Reading about your topic will give you an idea, but it won't prepare you for real-life experiences in the field. To fully understand your subject, move to where the action is. If you want to shoot wedding videos, you can live in just about any fair-sized town, but if you want to shoot big wave videos and still live in the United States, you need to move to Hawaii.

Make sure you realize the parameters of your niche. Remember Dirty Harry's line from *Magnum Force*: "A man has to know his limitations." In other words, don't promise anything you can't deliver,

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and don't put yourself in a position where you could get injured. Discuss with your client the shots that would be nice to have and the shots that the client must have. If you focus your attention on the must-have shots, other pieces of your storytelling will fall into place, because you will have at least two great takes in wide, medium, and close-up sequences.

If your event happens only once, then steady up, man! Keep the camera rolling and the tape active on the head. By shutting off the record button, you could lose 4 or 5 seconds of critical time. You may get only one take. Compared with the cost of getting you and your gear to the location, tape is cheap—so shoot lots of it to give your editor lots to work with. When I am in the field, everything I shoot—the angles, the lighting, the audio—is for the edit, the story. The footage explains my niche clearly and precisely to a viewer who has never seen my subject, without my uttering one sentence of narration.

Treat your client, your crew, and your subjects with respect and your reward will be returning business and a legacy of projects. If you need to strengthen an area of your expertise, don't be afraid to involve an outside consultant for your project or revert to a mentor for advice.

Learn from the best

In a nutshell, my career took off after I began working for Howard and Michele Hall, who, as the principals of Howard Hall Productions (HHP), specialize in underwater animal behavior. In the mid- to late 1980s, great television movies were being made about the ocean. These movies showed animals living their daily lives underwater like no other film ever had before. I figured the best way for me to make a start in the business was to shoot and edit projects on my own and learn from my mistakes. Since I funded everything from my primary job, my

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work was slow and my expectations were high. I was one of many thousands of people trying to reach for the golden ring of prime-time television.

I repeatedly contacted HHP over a period of years, sending congratulatory notes when the company would win yet another cinematography award. My persistence paid off when they gave me a chance to assist on their crew. Nine years and five IMAX films later, here I am, creating my own projects and grateful for the experiences.

So what's your niche?

If reality television moves you, you're heading to Los Angeles. Most people start working in reality TV by shooting or editing television news, honing their storytelling skills in the process. Next, start knocking on doors of all the big players in the industry, such as Mark Burnett Productions—reel in hand.

If you love action, check out Warren Miller Entertainment, whose ski films paved the way for the genre. Take a look also at companies such as NFL Films, which amazingly still shoots 16mm while maintaining a 24/7 stable of edit bays to create slick, state-of-the-art graphics.

Broadcasters such as Discovery or National Geographic Television and Film seldom create their own product. For the most part, their volume series come from outside production companies. If they create a special, they typically do so with in-house staff; both broadcasters are always hiring new young people looking to climb the corporate ladder. However, perhaps they need a mountain-climbing specialist or a shark expert—and that's where you fit in. If you live in the Washington, DC, area, drop off your CV and keep in contact monthly.

Lance Milbrand is currently working on a wildlife documentary for a nonprofit that promotes shark conservation (slated for broadcast in China), while helping with the restoration of a wetland for a major utility.

FIVE ITEMS EVERY NICHE VIDEOGRAPHER NEEDS

1. A genuine passion for your subject.
2. Well-maintained equipment (oftentimes with custom-made parts) or access to gear on short notice.
3. A professionally produced DVD reel showcasing current projects.
4. A solid marketing plan: maintaining a video-enabled Web site and networking at film festivals and other events.
5. Mental, physical, and financial preparedness—so you're able to accept projects when they're offered and weather lulls in work.