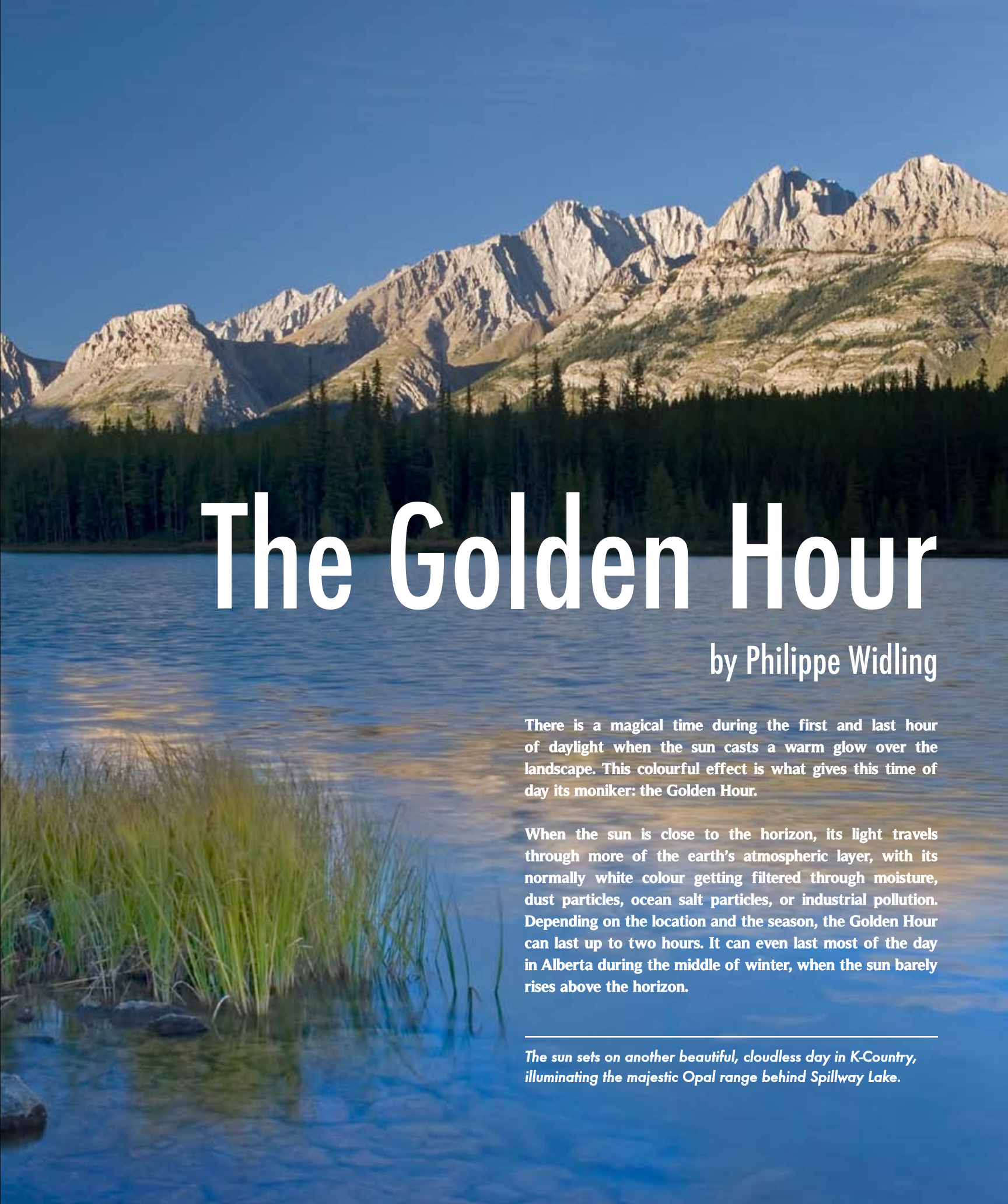

The Golden Hour

by Philippe Widling

There is a magical time during the first and last hour of daylight when the sun casts a warm glow over the landscape. This colourful effect is what gives this time of day its moniker: the Golden Hour.

When the sun is close to the horizon, its light travels through more of the earth's atmospheric layer, with its normally white colour getting filtered through moisture, dust particles, ocean salt particles, or industrial pollution. Depending on the location and the season, the Golden Hour can last up to two hours. It can even last most of the day in Alberta during the middle of winter, when the sun barely rises above the horizon.

The sun sets on another beautiful, cloudless day in K-Country, illuminating the majestic Opal range behind Spillway Lake.

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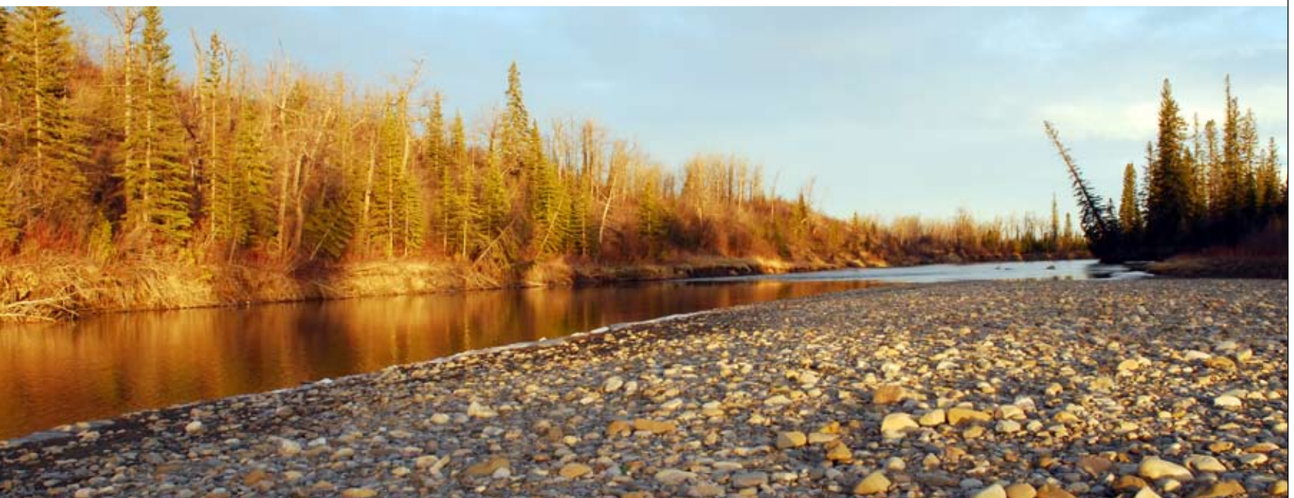

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Those familiar with Bragg Creek and Kananaskis, or even those who are regular readers of this magazine, are already aware of the region's wealth of beautiful photography locations. But knowing where to find great subject matter is only part of the equation – you also have to know *when* to visit those locations. Most photographers agree that the Golden Hour, or Magic Hour, is the best time of the day to be out enjoying and photographing nature's display of light and colours. By photographing K-Country during the Golden Hour, you'll be able to capture much more aesthetically pleasing images of the beautiful streams, lakes, and mountains of the region.

Standard photography techniques for capturing the Golden Hour

During the Golden Hour the sun blankets the landscape with a pleasing yellow or red warmth, and its low angle creates longer shadows to enhance details, especially when the subjects are side-lit. Although newer cameras can manage the contrast created by this soft light better, its lower intensity demands longer exposures, so you'll need to become familiar with your camera's exposure capabilities. To prevent vibrations and blurred images resulting from these longer exposures, you'll require a sturdy tripod that raises your camera to the eye level, while using a two-second delay on your camera's timer.

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For landscape photography, I strongly suggest that you set your camera to full manual mode and your white balance to "cloudy," or it will automatically try to remove the colourcast, causing your photos to lose the warm colours you worked so hard to achieve. If your camera doesn't have a manual mode, take note of the angle of light and the sun's direction, and then maximize the contrast in the picture between the shadow and the light.

During the day, most animals retreat to the cover of the forest or remote areas, so shooting earlier or later in the day can enhance your chances of coming across wildlife such as deer, elk, or bears.

Personally, I also enjoy the peace and quiet of having the place all to myself. I'm generally on location at least a half-hour before sunrise, and leave a half-hour after sunset.

Advanced techniques

Experienced photographers use advanced techniques with specialized equipment and accessories, one of the most common being filters. I typically use two filters for landscape photography: a polarizing filter and a neutral graduated filter.

A polarizing filter reduces the glare from water, leaves and atmospheric particles and produces more saturated colours ▶▶

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Preceding spread, counter-clockwise from top left: a Short-eared owl perfectly side-lit by the winter sunset; Elbow Falls on a fresh spring morning; spring sunset along the Elbow River; the early sun grazes the tip of Mount Lorette, taken from the Lorette Ponds.

This spread, clockwise from top left: sunlight breaks through downstream of Elbow Falls; October sunrise above Elbow Lake; a bugling Bull Elk along Highway 40 in Kananaskis.

and better contrast. However, it can also reduce the reflections in water that you may actually want to retain. Hold a filter in front of one eye and turn it to see if you like the effect, before mounting it onto the camera. A polarizing filter will absorb one-and-a-half to two stops of light, so increase your exposure time accordingly.

Neutral graduated filters are dark-gray at the top and fade progressively to clear toward the middle. They come in several intensities, but the two-stop filter is my personal preference. It reduces the luminosity of the sky to better match that of the ground, thereby producing a more balanced image.

Essential equipment

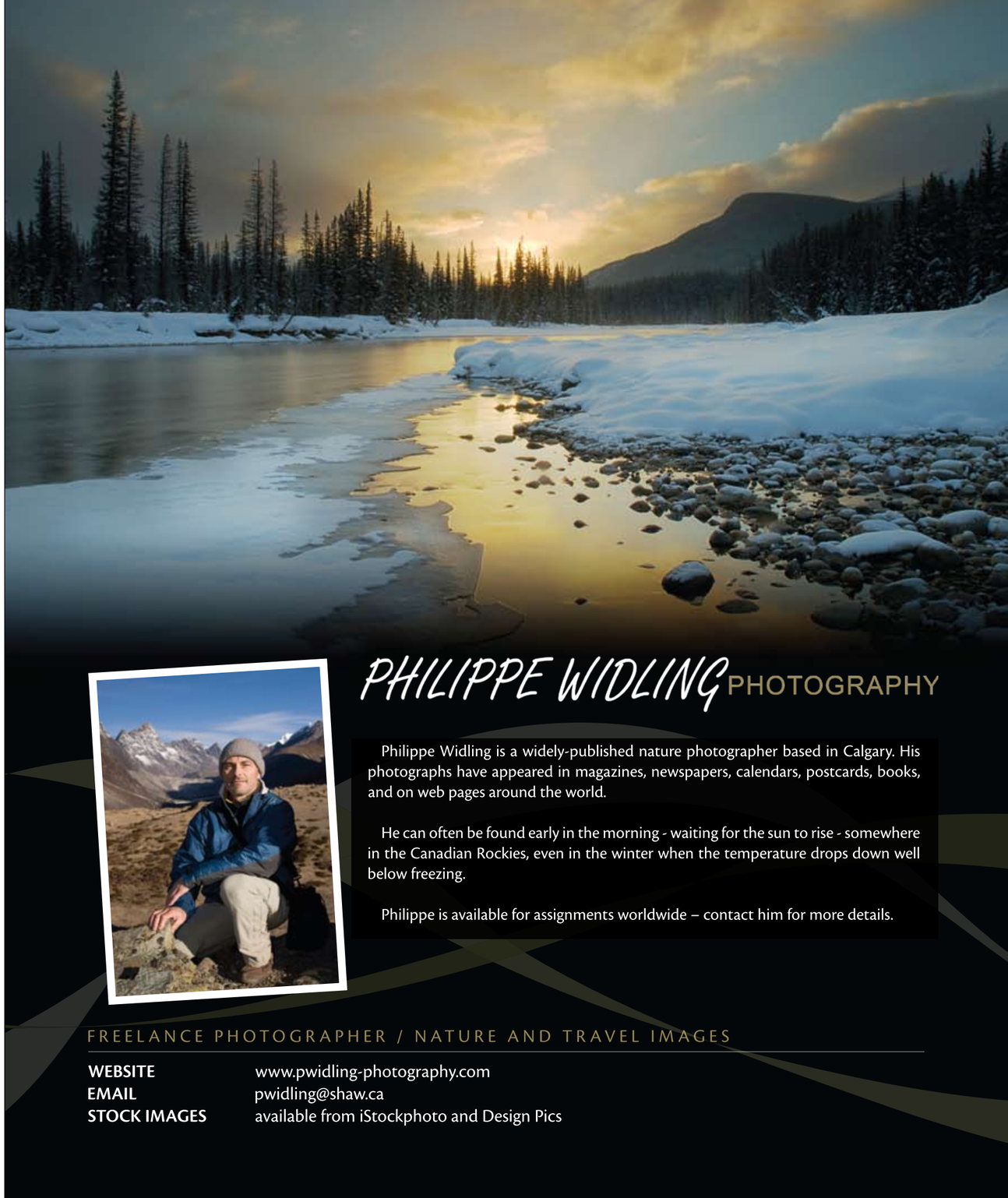
You will often have to find your way in the dark, so always carry a flashlight or headlamp with fresh batteries in your camera bag. And always be prepared – get everything ready the night before, including recharging your camera battery.

Remember, it can get extremely cold when waiting for sunrise along a river or a lake, so dress warmly, wear heavy-lined boots, a warm hat, and snug-fitting gloves. Always bring suitable nourishment and beverages: based on the season and on how long you'll be outside. Don't forget insect repellent in the summer and, if you are hiking far from the car, carry some bear spray and always let someone know where you will be.

Now that you're inspired to get out and capture some Golden Hour photography for yourself, I hope you'll enjoy perfecting these techniques and even try experimenting with some of your own. ■

Philippe Widling
Professional nature photographer

Top left: A late summer sunset on the Opal range in Kananaskis.



PHILIPPE WIDLING PHOTOGRAPHY

Philippe Widling is a widely-published nature photographer based in Calgary. His photographs have appeared in magazines, newspapers, calendars, postcards, books, and on web pages around the world.

He can often be found early in the morning - waiting for the sun to rise - somewhere in the Canadian Rockies, even in the winter when the temperature drops down well below freezing.

Philippe is available for assignments worldwide – contact him for more details.

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