

# Call of the wild

Street Paper vendor Bryant Carlin captures a rapidly changing landscape

BY BRIDGET MOUNTAIN  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Bryant Carlin plans on spending most of the next two years without a roof over his head. He'll be in the Olympic Mountains. Carlin is a wilderness photographer, and the pursuit of his craft sends him to remote places in search of captivating images. He also sees it as a mission; a mission driven by a sense of obligation to document what he sees, because he knows it's not going to be there forever.

Carlin got his first camera at 15; he's been a photographer ever since. His interest in the wilderness developed later, when he took summer trips to Florida and to Smoky Mountain National Park to capture the changing color of the autumn leaves. That exposure helped him realize how quickly things change, and he realized then that documenting the wilderness was his calling.

Carlin doesn't have a formal degree in photography. What he has is a degree in life. His experiences growing up in the wilderness of Alabama taught him to capture things on film that other people seemed to miss.

He moved to Seattle in 1994, thinking the city was a gateway to Alaska, where he wanted to go to become a wilderness photographer. Instead, he fell in love with the Pacific Northwest landscape, where the winters were a lot easier to survive. Having more natural light to work with at this latitude than in Alaska's was also a draw.

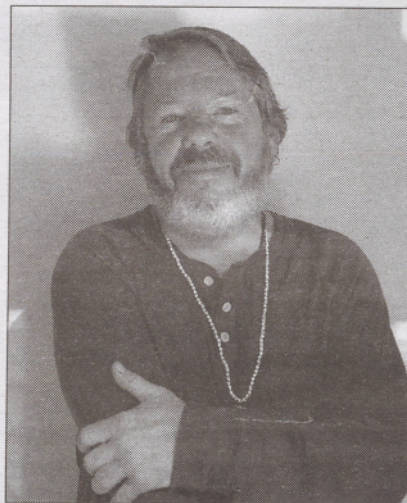
For his upcoming assignment, Carlin will be traversing the Olympic Mountains to be a research photographer. A big part of what he will be doing this winter is capturing sunrises and moonrises when the mountains and the distant Seattle cityscape light up.

This spring he is going to be in the Queets Rainforest, when the Roosevelt elk are giving birth.

During the summer, he'll be on the eastern face of the mountains, and will travel back to the Queets in the fall, when the bull elk will battle each other for domination during the rutting season.

"I'll get to know these elk herds very well because I'll spend about five months with them, between the spring and fall," Carlin said. In turn, they will start to recognize him and become more familiar with him. "When I did my three-month journey, I got to the point where one herd would let me be within 20 to 25 yards of them out in the wild, as long as I didn't press them," Carlin said.

Being able to build that relationship will help Carlin capture the elk in their habitat. "I want to be able to photograph two or three cows giving birth," Carlin said. He doesn't just want to capture elk staring at him and his camera; seeing how they live in nature is key. "Another thing that happens when an elk gives birth is that it attracts cougars," Carlin recalls from experience.



Bryant Carlin

PHOTO BY JON WILLIAMS

Last time he was tracking them, the campground had to shut down for a couple of days because a cougar was tracking the elk.

The same storm shut down Seattle, while Bryant was in the Olympics documenting the winter.

This will just be one of the many dramas that Carlin will be documenting over his 25-month expedition. He also wants to find an active bear den and a fresh cougar kill. Cougars like fresh meat, so once they are done with their prey, Carlin wants to be able to see what other critters the fresh kill attracts.

While documenting how and why other animals congregate, Carlin will be spending most of his two years in the wild alone, save for a few supply runs and occasional visitors. He will leave behind a well-crafted community.

Carlin is part of an organization called Conservation Made Simple, a nonprofit that aims to empower people to acknowledge and reduce their environmental impact.

Real Change, Street Roots sister paper in Seattle, helped Carlin get connected; he was selling the newspaper at his usual spot when he noticed a young man with a really nice camera. He struck up a conversation with him.

"I gave him my contact info and about a week later he contacted me and we started an interview process," Carlin said. "Because he met me as a Real Change vendor, he knew from the start where I was coming from economically."

Carlin started selling Real Change when another vendor recommended he give it a try. He had been homeless for almost a month when he discovered the paper.

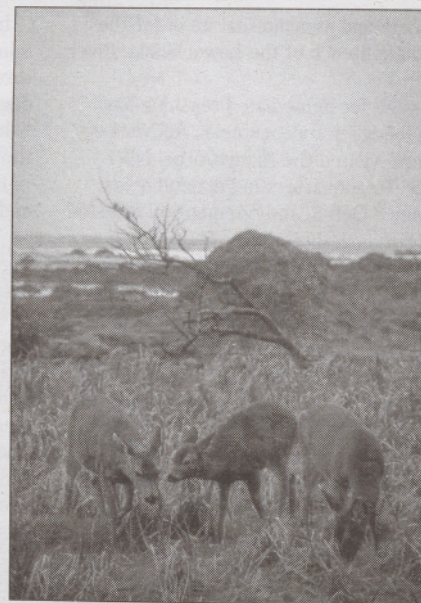
Most of Carlin's family still lives in Alabama. He grew up in a middle-class area outside of Birmingham; "where I'm from in Alabama is a place that could be compared to (the Seattle suburb) Kirkland," Carlin said.

He has a sister who is four years younger



PHOTOS BY BRYANT CARLIN

Above, the Queets River in the Olympic Peninsula. At right, young Roosevelt elk foraging in Northeast Washington.



than him and a half-brother who is about 20 years younger.

"I've maintained close relationships with family even with the struggles that I've had with homelessness," Carlin said. He gets back to Alabama about once a year and all of his close family has been up to visit him before. His family knows he's homeless; that hardship has made it difficult on his relationships, but family is family and everyone understands.

Carlin is also an alcoholic, and he knows that this illness is a contributing factor to his struggles with homelessness. "Beyond the obvious economic situation in Seattle, I do think it's true that once you start to see chronic or long-term homelessness, the two driving factors are addiction or mental health, or a combination of the two," Carlin said.

"What I think is the hardest part about dealing with alcoholism is the fact that it is legal. You can buy it everywhere," Carlin said. He talks about how he goes out into the wilderness to take a break from the city and to get away from his alcoholism. He doesn't drink when he's in the mountains.

"At the end of the day, you have to learn to say no. There is no escaping alcohol,"

Carlin said. He has been living on the street for about five years, but has been a Real Change vendor off and on since 2004.

Though Carlin has struggled with addiction and homelessness, he hasn't let that stand in the way of being a photographer.

If you would like to learn more about Conservation Made Simple, make a donation to Carlin's project or see more of his photography, log onto their website.