

[https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/scene/film/jackson-wild-media-lab-creates-stories-community/article\\_29b53a6f-a69c-58c3-a757-4bc7e36992f6.html](https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/scene/film/jackson-wild-media-lab-creates-stories-community/article_29b53a6f-a69c-58c3-a757-4bc7e36992f6.html)

## Jackson Wild Media Lab creates stories, community

Young filmmakers from around the world made short films for Grand Teton.

By Billy Arnold

Oct 2, 2019



Reba McCracken is interviewed on camera while a Jackson Wild Media Lab fellow shoots video. The lab took place during Jackson Wild Summit, when four groups of four filmmakers made documentaries about science projects local to Grand Tet National Park. The projects enabled them to learn from one another and from professional storytellers.

REGINA BARBER DEGRAAF / COURTESY PHOTO

Gab Mejia, Jonathan Byers and their group had only five days to cobble together a story about the habituation of foxes in Grand Teton National Park. There was one problem.

They didn't have any foxes.

That put their team in a bit of a pickle.

“How are we going to tell this compelling story about foxes with no footage of foxes and no conclusive statements about how we can take care of or protect the foxes?” Byers asked.

Luckily, they found an answer: planning and creative photography.

They got down to fox-eye level and shot scenes from the vantage point of a scavenging canine. And, eventually, after three days of work, their luck changed.

They got the shot they needed: a fox in Grand Teton National Park.

“We just walked around the corner, and it was perfectly in the sunlight there, and we got some good footage of it and we were able to tell our story,” Byers said.

But that shot wasn’t just a victory for the four up-and-coming filmmakers, who were working together for the first time as part of the 2019 Jackson Wild Media Lab. It was also a first. The National Park Service employee they were working with had never seen that fox before.

Over the course of six days the Media Lab brought 16 fellows from all over the world to work with four teams of scientists to produce four films about stories local to Grand Teton National Park. Mejia and Byers’ film was about foxes becoming habituated to human food. Another group produced a film about bats and light pollution. The other two made films about invasive plants and the rockfall at Hidden Falls.

All four of the films were shown Tuesday at the 2019 Jackson Wild Summit, where a room of 100-plus filmmakers from across the globe gathered to watch. They were also screened at the Voices of Wonder Film Festival and are now in the hands of Grand Teton National Park, which is developing a strategy for rolling them out.

Neil Losin, the owner of Day’s Edge Productions, which put on the lab, said his firm has run film workshops around the globe, but last week’s program was the biggest he’d done. He felt it was a unique experience for the participating filmmakers.

“Jackson Wild is a place that already brings together the very best science and conservation and natural history media creators in the world,” Losin said. “We get to bring in these guest mentors who are absolutely the leaders of the industry, and being able to do that for these fellows is an incredible opportunity for them. It’s also a great way for the leaders of the industry to see who might be the rising stars and identify that talent and foster them.”

Losin said Tuesday that those conversations were just starting, but he was confident they'd take off in the next few days. The filmmakers just needed to get a good night's sleep so they could "hit the ground running tomorrow and then start taking over the world."

## **Power of collaboration**

Mejia, a 22-year-old National Geographic Grantee from the Philippines, seems already to be on a storytelling-driven path to do so.

He became involved with National Geographic in 2017, when he won an international photo competition and traveled to Patagonia to tell a story about wetlands. He has since shot films for the World Wildlife Fund-Philippine's National Youth Council and is a Nikon ambassador for Asia.

But with all that under his belt, Mejia, who is used to working alone or with the help of a small team under his command, said he learned an important thing in the Media Lab: the power of collaboration.

"That is what makes good stories, and that is what really pushes the boundaries of humanity," he said. "We're not really able to create things without the help of others."

That takeaway was common among the fellows, who came from several countries — fellows traveled for the summit from the United States, the Philippines, Zambia and a swath of other nations — and disciplines. Some came from strict science backgrounds, others from the world of science communications and the world of multimedia storytelling.

Collaborating and putting together a five-minute film in such a hurry was certainly challenging. Byers and Mejia said their group occasionally had differences of opinion that had to be resolved.

But working as a team allowed the filmmakers to learn through osmosis, picking up skills from their peers and learning from professional storytellers from National Geographic and other media institutions that guided the fellows.

Collaborating also produced something else: community.

Kevin McLean, a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of California-Davis, enjoyed speaking with industry leaders but said one of the best parts of the Media Lab was meeting the other fellows.

“Moving forward into the world, if you have a question you’re not going to email the executive you’ve met,” he said.

Alex Dainis, a Los Angeles science communicator who collaborated with McLean and two others on the film about bats, agreed.

“It’s great to have those connections with mentors, but it’s equally as important to have connections to peers,” she said. “You’re all encountering similar problems, and as soon as somebody finds a solution, you can share it.”

McLean put it bluntly: “It’s networking, but it’s not gross.”

## **The giveback**

Connections aside, Mejia said he hoped to use what he’d learned about collaboration to tell stories back home, and one in particular about the Agusan Marsh Wildlife Sanctuary, which he called the “last intact wilderness in the Philippines.”

He said that in his home country, which has been labeled the deadliest country in the world for environmental activists, collaborating with local storytellers was particularly important when discussing the threat industries and mining companies pose to places like the marsh.

“I want to create a film that’s made by local storytellers,” Mejia said. He thought it important to have “Filipinos to tell that story.”

Peri Sasnett, who participated both as a fellow and a liaison between the Media Lab and Grand Teton National Park, where she works in science communications, said films like the ones fellows made were powerful means of getting a message across.

“In writing, you imagine yourself there; in photography you can see it, but maybe you can’t hear it. And in film you can see it, you can hear it and you can connect with it in a way that you can’t always in other mediums,” she said. “It can be a really powerful way to tell scientific stories.”

Sasnett thought the stories fellows told could resonate with local audiences.

“It’s not a distant story,” she said. “It’s not the Amazon or the Arctic — it’s right here. This is something you can engage with directly, and I think that helps them develop that emotional connection with the story that you’re telling.”

---

Contact Billy Arnold at 732-7062 or [entertainment@jhnewsandguide.com](mailto:entertainment@jhnewsandguide.com).

---

## **Billy Arnold**

Scene Editor Billy Arnold covers arts and entertainment. He apprenticed as a sound engineer at the Beachland Ballroom in Cleveland, Ohio before making his way to Jackson, where he has become a low-key fan of country music.