

# Thomas Porter

For Canadian photographer,  
work is play



At age 31, Thomas Porter has built a thriving photography business doing what he loves best in the place he loves best—the great outdoors. “People were meant to be outdoors,” says the Saskatchewan native, who is an avid outdoorsman, hunter and fisherman. “The people here are at one with their environment. Most are hearty, rugged people with a zest for the outdoors. It is part of who they are and part of who I am.”

Porter started as a newspaper photojournalist in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Because the subject matter was often grim and the hours were brutal, Porter decided to leave photojournalism behind and strike out on his own to do commercial and retail work. Porter believes that his photojournalism background has helped to set him apart from his competitors: “I was used to having tight deadlines, strange hours and only moments to get images that matter,” he says.

Porter is a generalist who has mined every possible opportunity in his area. “I do everything from mineral exploration documentation, cross-country canoe races, dog-sledding events, winter carnivals, summer fairs, family photos, weddings, hockey teams, sports action, travel and tourism images, antique photo restorations, custom photographics and design, product shots, art photos and business portraiture,” he says. He counts *Mushing, Prairies North, Canadian Diamonds*, the *Canadian Press* and *Cycle Canada* among his editorial clients. It sounds like a lot for one photographer to juggle, but according to Porter, “You just have to assess the needs of the client and never be afraid to accept new challenges.”

Saskatchewan is a huge province: The British Isles could fit into it two-and-a-half times. However, it has a relatively small population of 900,000 residents who are scattered throughout the province. Porter draws clients from a service area with more than 250,000 people. Many are a two-hour drive away. Porter is one of a few professional photographers in the area, and one of an even smaller group who is willing to travel outside the studio. “It has made a huge difference for me to be flexible and mobile. My overhead costs are relatively low, so I can afford to travel around with my camera.” As for marketing and self-promotion, he says, “It’s not hard for your name to get around out here. You can see a billboard for 30 miles.”

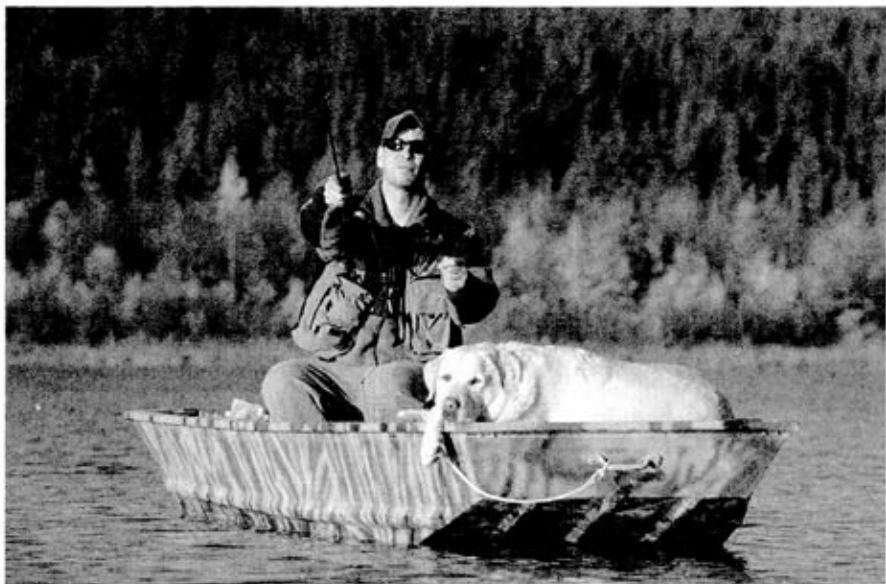
Porter has an 800-square-foot studio in his home where he does product shots, family portraits, and portfolio shots for models, musicians and theater performers. However, only 20 percent of his work is done in the studio. “I do the bulk of my work outdoors. It’s where I prefer to be; it’s where my clients prefer to be. We’ve done weddings on the ski slope and family portraits on snowmobiles and boats,” says Porter, who admits that the climate can be hostile.

The frigid temperatures can be hard on camera equipment as well as people, but Porter has developed mechanisms to keep his equipment warm in winter, including modifying military equipment. “I don’t even carry a camera bag any more,” he says. “I wear a SWAT vest outfitted for camera gear. I look freaky, but I think that’s half the reason people like me. I look like I mean business.”

Porter is developing a new niche that dovetails nicely with his outdoor photography: tourism. Saskatchewan’s economy has traditionally been based in forestry and agriculture, but the government and civic organizations are starting to realize the area’s potential as a tourist destination. Armed with a folder of model releases, Porter captures photos of people water-skiing, camping and hiking for this emerging tourism market. Regional magazines, provincial tourism bureaus and economic development offices publish these Canadian lifestyle photos.

Although Porter loves the outdoors, he also believes in keeping up with technology. Porter is the only photographer in the area who does digital work exclusively, which gives him an edge because many clients want only digital images. Porter is glad because this eliminates the expense of film and processing, and provides a much quicker turnaround for his clients. He also creates 360-degree interactive virtual reality photos for the Web. Clients for the virtual reality photos include a new arena complex and an art gallery. “If you can provide something unique with the products and services you offer, then you have no competition,” he says.

Porter’s advice to aspiring photographers: “Start small, minimize expenses, market your strength and do the thing you enjoy. Try new things, but be honest about your experience in new areas. Be willing to offer a bit of a deal on jobs you have little or no experience with. Join every association, service group and special interest club you can. The more people who know your name, the better. Be a civic promoter, donate time and funds wherever you can; it will come back to you tenfold. Don’t give your photographic services away, mind



A 200mm telephoto lens helped Porter capture this quintessential Canadian lifestyle image as he sat in a belly boat on Dog Lake in Saskatchewan.

you: Just be out there in the community and show you are committed to it.”

Porter is pleased that his business is flourishing in Saskatchewan, a place of great natural beauty with plenty of opportunities for outdoor recreation. A consummate generalist, Porter has made the most of the opportunities his environment has to offer. He hopes to expand his business into other provinces for corporate work in the future. He is also working on a coffee-table book with his father, a range ecologist from Alberta. Whatever he does in the future, Porter will keep his eye on the progress of technology and look for ways to use it in his business. “Fortune favors those who can adapt and be creative in their own time,” he says.

—Donna Poehner