

TV'S WILDEST HOST

Before Marty Stouffer's *Wild America* was born, nature lovers watched Marlin Perkins' *Wild Kingdom*. Jacques Cousteau's *Undersea World* was another wildlife favorite, as well as Lorne Greene's *Last of the Wild* and Bill Burrud's *Animal World*. Even Walt Disney got into the act as one of the earliest natural history filmmakers. Now, only Stouffer's *Wild America* remains as the latest and possibly the most popular of them all. Stouffer took the standards of the business, shook them up, broke all the rules, and created an outstanding and innovative program that's been among the top-rated regular series on PBS every year for the past decade. What Stouffer's predecessors taught him was good. What he came up with himself is even better.

While most nature programs traveled the globe to film the exotic and unusual creatures in far away places, Stouffer chose to stay close to home. He had a hunch that American viewers were eager to see what kind of wildlife their own country had to offer. So, figuring that less is more, Stouffer scaled the Animal Kingdom down to size and focused only on the creatures of North America. He also realized that even an eager audience has a limited attention span. Accordingly, he developed his program length to an untraditional half hour, and thereby created a format that was easier to develop and allowed more experimentation in subject matter. A program such as "Beautiful Blues," about all the places the color blue is found in nature, could never have filled an hour long program, but is perfectly suited for a shorter format.

Like any good informational series host, Stouffer gets up close and personal with his subjects. Not a particularly shy person, Stouffer moves right in to film the more shocking aspects of the wild--sex and violence. Close up mating scenes and dramatic life and death chases between predator and prey are not only regular fare on *Wild America*, but also the spark that ignites some irate viewers in protest. As Stouffer explains, "It's uncomfortable and controversial when people see animals mating and killing on tv because we don't approve of that kind of behavior among our own species. But animals don't see it that way. All they know is what their instinct tells them they must do to survive." Clearly, Stouffer believes there is no side stepping the reality of the wild. "What happens in nature is exciting on its own. We just try to document it."

From the start, Stouffer's assertive subject matter set his series apart. His presentation also proved that this was a nature program not quite like the others. Static shots, jerky zooms and dizzying pans of the past went out. Close ups, slow motion and breathtaking time lapses came in. "We wanted to make wildlife documentaries a more aesthetically pleasing format," says Stouffer. With this fresh new approach, Stouffer was able to demonstrate "the magic of film." He utilized the camera's ability to go places where the human eye can't--to the inside of the most secluded den or the inside of an animal's body. "I love the ordinary, especially when I discover, by filming it, the things that make it extraordinary," Stouffer declares. He is especially proud of the time lapses that have become one of *Wild America's* trademarks. Used as transitions between sequences, a time lapse speeds up the action to show a spectacular sunset from start to finish or the

majestic Maroon Bells as they dissolve into snow capped winter, then melt into blooming spring and full green summer, right before your eyes.

As the creator of *Wild America*, Stouffer has the absolute power to impose any of these new techniques and break all the rules he wants. You might say he is a Renaissance man of wildlife documentaries. He writes. He films. He directs. He produces. His knowledge of wildlife is so extensive he stops just short of talking with the animals in the manner of Doctor Doolittle. How many other nature program hosts can claim as many talents? Only Jacques Cousteau has proven himself an actual filmmaker and only Marlin Perkins an animal expert. The many others who have come and gone, pretty much got the job based on their voice and appearance, and had little to do with the production of the programs. (Some critics say the opposite is true of Stouffer. He got the job based on his experience, in spite of his voice and appearance.)

As a compliment of sorts, Stouffer has been called "The New Marlin Perkins" and, indeed, Stouffer probably has more in common with Perkins than anyone else. Both managed to become well known and respected figures in the field of animal study, yet neither has a wildlife biology degree and Perkins never even finished college. Both childhoods, Stouffer's in rural Arkansas and Perkins' in rural Missouri, were spent chasing garter snakes and toads, and keeping billy goats as pets, spurring their interests to pursue careers working with animals. While Perkins labored as a cage cleaner before working his way up to becoming the director of zoos in St. Louis, Buffalo and Chicago, Stouffer began filming wildlife as a hobby, and soon discovered he could make a real living at it. In addition to their billy goat, the Stouffer boys had an ever changing menagerie of wild pets and an equally exciting series of adventures. The semi-autobiographical story of Stouffer and his two filmmaker brothers is currently being developed as a feature film.

For over twenty years Perkins was the charming and dapper host of *Wild Kingdom*, pointing out exotic locations on the map in the studio, while associate host Jim Fowler was out wrestling the alligators. People got to know and trust Perkins. And now, though it wasn't his intention, it's fitting that people think of Stouffer in somewhat the same way they used to think of Perkins.

As the old and new ring leaders of the animal circus, Perkins and Stouffer share one overwhelming trait. People believe in them as voices of authority when it comes to wildlife. And now, something Stouffer has been saying for a long time is becoming a great concern to many Americans. A recent poll conducted by *SELF* magazine shows that forty four percent of its readers believe the number one most important issue of the 1990's will be the environment. Though a trendy subject today, Stouffer was concerned about it twenty years ago when he spent three years seeking out and filming every animal on the Endangered Species list for one of his earliest films, "At The Crossroads--The Story of America's Endangered Species." His conservation message was strong when he said, "Our civilization pushes on and closes in on the few remaining wild areas. We are competing with the other inhabitants of this land for space to live. And we are winning."

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become extinct in the wild, having made their last appearance before Stouffer's camera. Fortunately, efforts are underway to restore both species to the wild through captive breeding of the few remaining specimens.

If nothing else, Stouffer hopes his contribution towards exposing America's rich natural heritage has made a difference, and made people more aware of the delicate balance between the civilized and untamed elements of our country. If *Wild America's* Top Ten status on PBS for many years is any indication, Stouffer has made a difference. He has staying power. And if he gets his way, he'll stay as long as viewers want to watch America's fascinating wildlife go about the business of living.