

ONCE IN A BLUE MOON? ▶

Nature photographer David Smart reflects on his job and the rarity of some of the unusual natural phenomena he photographs.

I tread carefully, trying to crush as few of the beautiful flowers as possible. But I need to get in the best position to photograph this stunning display of blue, violet and yellow that fills the view. Where am I? In one of the royal London parks in spring? Maybe the famous Kawachi Fuji flower gardens of Japan? No, I'm in the driest place in the world, the Atacama Desert in Chile. And in front of me is the wonderful sight known as Desert Bloom. I angle my camera, focus and click. Job done, I can now stand back, breathe in the scent of millions of flowers and enjoy the moment.

Seeing a rare natural phenomenon like the Desert Bloom is not a one-off for me; I've photographed the Niagara Falls when they were partially frozen over; I've experienced the weird and wonderful rush of darkness during a total eclipse. I'm lucky that my work as a professional nature photographer takes me to some of the most amazing places in the world and pays reasonably well. However, it's the really unusual sights which nature occasionally provides for us that really fascinate me. As one of my photographer friends says, 'It feels a real privilege.'

But in reality, just **how** rare are events like these? Tabloid headlines need to sell copies and imply that they are once-in-a-blue-moon events. 'Niagara Falls completely frozen over', shouts one newspaper,

'The only total eclipse you'll see in your lifetime', shouts another and 'Miracle of flowers in the desert', says a third. In fact, these phenomena, although unusual, are not as unlikely as the hype suggests. Niagara Falls have partially frozen over several times - when winds from the North Pole brought arctic temperatures further south (a symptom of climate change). And although apparently inexplicable, those stunning flowers in the desert will flower again in another five or seven years. The seeds lie in the soil and will grow whenever there is a lot of rainfall.

Real, once-in-a-blue-moon events **do** happen, but it is only by chance that they are ever seen or recorded. For example, there's one spectacular event that I would desperately love to see. It's known as a Fire Rainbow, but is actually neither connected to fire, nor a rainbow! Sadly, I'm never likely to see one anywhere apart from in a photograph. These incredible optical phenomena, which appear to be amazing combinations of colours in the sky, only occur when there is a very specific combination of atmospheric conditions. In addition to this, they are only visible from high altitudes.


Being in the right place at the right time is what a nature photographer like me longs for, but it doesn't happen very often.

I got my wish once, and like the Desert Bloom it was in Chile. I was there to film a volcanic eruption at Volcan Calbuco, a very dangerous active volcano. While filming, I was treated to a rare display of volcanic lightning. This is a unique type of electrical reaction that happens inside a great cloud of ash, otherwise known as a 'dirty thunderstorm'. I say 'treated' but the experience was so terrifying that my first instincts were to run like mad! The attraction of photographing one of the greatest light shows on earth was, however, very strong and those pictures are among the best I have ever taken.

I think my obsession with these rare natural phenomena should be quite clear by now! I'm very fortunate to have a job which allows me to travel to record as many as I can. The scientific reasons behind such events are certainly fascinating but for me it will always be about their magnificent beauty. The powerful surprises that nature continues to deliver will never cease to amaze me. Whether they are just unusual or truly once in a lifetime experiences, I can't see myself ever getting tired of chasing them.

Now, maybe just one more photo of these incredible flowers ...

EXAM TASK

5 Read the article again. For questions 1–6, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text. 

- 1 What point is the writer making in the first paragraph?
 - A He often takes photographs of flowers in different gardens.
 - B He is more interested in his photography than what he photographs.
 - C He is photographing something that is unusual because of the climate.
 - D He needs to be flexible when he's working.
- 2 How does the writer feel about his work?
 - A impressed by the amount of money he earns
 - B surprised at how often he has to travel
 - C grateful for the opportunity to observe rare events
 - D proud to be so well-experienced
- 3 What is the writer's attitude towards tabloid newspapers?
 - A He thinks they are too influential.
 - B He suspects they exaggerate to attract readers.
 - C He believes they do not check their facts.
 - D He wonders why they contradict each other.
- 4 When talking about Fire Rainbows, the writer regrets that
 - A he cannot explain the reason for Fire Rainbows.
 - B he has never seen a photograph of one.
 - C he is unaware how they got their name.
 - D his chances of seeing one are very low.
- 5 The writer repeats the word 'treated' in paragraph 5
 - A to indicate that the experience wasn't immediately enjoyable.
 - B to show that the event had never happened before.
 - C to emphasise how amazing the sight was.
 - D to stress how special the event made him feel.
- 6 What does the writer believe about the science behind rare natural events?
 - A It's always important to know why an event occurs.
 - B Science cannot always explain these types of events.
 - C It's interesting but not as important as the visual effects.
 - D Understanding the scientific reasons is not part of his job.