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UNI hosts exhibit of National Geographic photographer's work

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Joel Sartore hangs out with walruses in Alaska. He stalks frogs in California. He sidles up to giant lizards in Bolivia.

In other words, he's a photographer for National Geographic. An exhibition of his work, called "Fragile Nature," opened this weekend and remains on display through Oct. 24 at the University of Northern Iowa Museum.

The exhibition, which includes photos from North and South America, focuses on the plight of endangered species and the strategies humans can take to help.

"This bottom line of this show is to get people thinking about the world we live in," Sartore said in a press release from the museum. "There's never been a moment in history when humans have been so disconnected from the natural world, and yet we're totally dependent on a healthy Earth for survival. We have to have clean air, clean water and good food. To think that we're not intimately tied to the natural world is folly."

Sartore's photo collection is part of a broader exhibition called "Images of the Irreplaceable Wild," which will feature NG photographer Jim Brandenburg's tribute to the American prairie. That show, called "Touch the Sky," opens Nov. 2 and runs through Dec. 23.

3219 Hudson Road in Cedar Falls. Free. (319) 273-2188, www.uni.edu/museum.

Cresco artist gained fame in her own right

Stroll through Cresco's Beadle Park and it's hard to miss the 13-foot sculpture of Nobel laureate Norman Borlaug, the town's most famous native son.

That monument's sculptor, Karen Laub-Novak, grew up in Cresco, too. She studied at the University of Iowa, resettled in Washington, D.C., and became an internationally known artist before cancer took her life earlier this month, on Aug. 12. She was 71.

The artist and her husband, the conservative think-tanker Michael Novak, often entertained a high-powered bunch of friends at their home, including U.S. Rep. Clare Booth Luce, journalist Charles Krauthammer and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, according to an obituary in the Washington Post.

But Laub-Novak gained fame in her own right. Her sculptures, paintings and prints have been displayed throughout the world. One critic called her portrayal of Borlaug "one of the two most beautiful statues in North America"; the other was Augustus Saint-Gaudens' hooded bronze "Grief" at the Adams Memorial in Washington's Rock Creek Cemetery, where Laub-Novak was buried.

The artist sculpted pieces for churches, crafted awards for various organizations and illustrated numbers books and magazines.

Early on, however, her work failed to get attention, and she collected a stack of rejections from gallery owners and curators. After sending countless letters under her full name, she finally decided to sign a note to an important museum with a simple "K." instead of Karen. It worked: The director sent her a warm response.

From then on, she signed all of her work as K. Laub-Novak.

Other events

- A screening of the feature-length comedy "16 to Life," which was filmed in McGregor, is scheduled for 4 p.m. at the Elkader Cinema (free) and 7 p.m. at the Elkader Opera House (\$5) on Thursday. Iowa native Becky Smith directed the cast and crew, who will participate in the day's events. (563) 873-2378, www.16tolifethemovie.org.
 - Sioux City's annual ArtSplash festival, which last year drew an estimated 35,000 visitors, begins Friday and runs through Sept. 6 on the city's riverfront. The 16th annual event includes a juried art show, live music, an auction and more. 4-8 p.m. Friday (\$30 in advance, \$40 at the gate), 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday and noon-5 p.m. Sept. 6 (\$5 for both Saturday and Sunday; free for kids under 12). (712) 279-6272, www.siouxcityartcenter.org/artsplash.
 - The microphone at this month's Flying Pig Barn Dance belongs to dance-caller Jim Thaxter of Colombia, Mo., with the local Talking Fiddleheads, from 8-11 p.m. Saturday at the Des Moines Social Club. Admission is \$6, no experience is necessary, and everyone is welcome, including couples, singles, show-offs, clutzes, geezers, punks and whippersnappers. (515) 325-6349, www.flyingpigfiddlebanjo.com.
 - The award-winning Brooklyn-based artist Cat Chow's show "Love Me or Die" runs through Sept. 20 at the University of Northern Iowa Gallery of Art in Cedar Falls. Her sculptures and wearable artwork have been displayed nationwide, and she will design the costumes for Theatre UNI's "Marat Sade." Free. (319) 273-3095, www.uni.edu/artdept/gallery.
 - The Iraqi-born painter Amer Saleh al-Obaidi celebrates the first anniversary of his family's arrival in Des Moines with an art show at Plymouth Church. The exhibition runs through Oct. 16. (515) 255-3149, www.plymouthchurch.com.
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