



## NICK NICHOLS A NETHER WORLD

Though he's best known for his remarkable images of great apes, Michael K. "Nick" Nichols, 40, had his first photographic adventures in places far darker than darkest Africa: He explored caves. So when *National Geographic* sent him into New Mexico's just-discovered Lechuguilla Cave, he was right at home.

Nonetheless, the cavern's extraordinary size and complexity—and its total absence of light—tested more than Nichols's endurance and rock-climbing skills. "Any electronic flash gear portable enough to pack in wouldn't have been powerful enough to light the cave's enormous chambers," says Nichols. "So we used big old-fashioned flashbulbs." Each of Nichols's assistants carried 100 bulbs at a time, and they were used to light the background in this eerie shot of caver Anne Strait crossing Lechuguilla's Lake Castrovalva. Strait herself was illuminated by underwater strobes, while Nichols's camera was safe inside a waterproof housing on a fully submerged tripod. The blur was created with a one-second exposure by battery-powered video light. "The video light was my way of dealing with a static environment," Nichols explains. "It let me capture the movement of the cavers." Yet, Nichols's Lechuguilla photos also testify powerfully to the need to preserve the mineral majesty of the cave. "I didn't want the pictures to be just about the experience," he says. "My work used to be about pure adventure, but along the way I realized that wasn't enough."

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