

SPRING 2006

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ART WOLFE
**Wildlife in
Hiding**

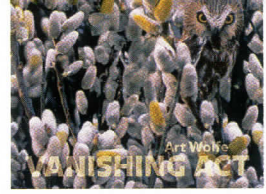
NEW BOOKS

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Art Wolfe

MASTER



Art Wolfe's view of a black-tailed deer has the quality of a natural-history diorama.

In *Vanishing Act*, this master of wildlife photography crafts brilliant studies of animals that would rather not be seen. **By Russell Hart**



Wildlife photographs are usually heroic, their subjects isolated against an out-of-focus background. That familiar look grows as much from the photographer's wish to parse the complexity of nature as it does from the shallow depth of field produced by telephoto lenses, almost always used for such pictures. Art Wolfe is an acknowledged master of heroic animal imagery, but *Vanishing Act* (Bulfinch, \$50), his new book, turns the genre on its ear, embracing the raw density of nature.

As its title suggests, the book's creatures use color, shape, and pattern to disappear into their environments and thus hide from predator or prey. But Wolfe gives them ample photographic support, using a variety of techniques to aid their disguise, such as increasing depth of field to sharpen things from front to back; making the animal small or significantly off-center in the frame; and including elements with shapes, tones, and colors similar to those of the subject, which compete for the viewer's attention. The result is that the viewer is forced to search the scene—sometimes for a long time—to find the animal its title identifies. The images are a sort of grown-up, real-world Where's Waldo? puzzle.

Wolfe's invisible subjects aren't just insects imitating sticks and leaves or chameleons matching the surface on which they've been caught. An impala's dark antlers pass for the tree branches that surround them, while its tan body blends with dry grass below. A marmot's red coat and angular features are lost in a sunny field of lichen-crusted rocks. A deer lurks behind a screen of small leaves, some sharp, some soft, that break up its shape and mimic its white spots. You think you've spied a single antelope blending perfectly into its perch on a rocky slope—guilefully, Wolfe has centered it for you—then discover a second hiding in a corner of the frame.

In their diversionary density, Wolfe's new images remind us of the most fashionable fine-art landscape work, in which elements of a scene all have the same weight. But the photographer's purpose is less obscure, even if his subjects are more so. The pictures in *Vanishing Act* invite a more natural way of seeing—truer to our experience of wildlife in nature, where one must stand still and look carefully to see its greatest treasures. ■

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M A S T E R





Ordinarily the centerpiece of the African veldt, Wolfe's giraffe fades into a dry thicket.





Two klipspringer are perfectly camouflaged against the rocky slopes of their environment at a national park in Botswana. Can you find the second one?