

The Hunt

Words & Photo: Joanna Lentini // Location: Bolivia

Weaving in and out of the shadows, thousands of flat, reflective bodies flicker in a cascade of morning light, then disappear into deep, dark pockets, not yet revealed by the rising sun. Resident sea lions whizz past, tempting me to follow, but my focus remains fixed as I wait. Above, sleek aquatic birds contemplate their next move, while the invisible surge has its way with those submerged.

Rooted to the sea floor, boulders the size of sheds offer havens for any separated in the chaos. They also prove to be obstacles for those far bigger and less agile than sardines. On their own, the fish stand little chance against predators, but together, as one, they are almost impenetrable.

I am familiar with the idiosyncrasies of this undersea terrain, and how the light would continue to fall upon it, so I knew that the odds of capturing the image I sought were stacked against me – timing, lighting, and the nature of wild animals all played their part. But it was an experience worth waiting for, and an image I had wanted to create for almost a decade.

Having camped at a nearby cove the previous night, we had fewer underwater distractions than usual. But dozens of day boats were en route from La Paz, and soon the waters would be teeming with snorkelers and bubble trails. I scouted the terrain, found the ideal backdrop, and prayed to a higher power.

Others dived with me. My companions also hoped to encounter, and even photograph, double-crested cormorants hunting for sardines. I knew the weight of the decision they'd been forced to make – ignoring dozens of playful sea lions is a big ask for first-timers.

Huddled tightly together in the shallows of the rocky islet, surrounded by walls of sardines, I wondered if the fish found solace in our presence. I know I did in theirs. The light streaming through the water column exuded a magical quality, and the sardines, mesmerising in their fight for survival, disoriented me.

Sudden movement. From above darts a slender feathered silhouette. Through the blue it moves, sleek and graceful. And in the blink of an eye a delicate dance between predator and prey begins. Sardines, moving as one, flick and shift more quickly than I can follow. The cormorant finds itself in a similar predicament.

Unsuccessful, the bird ascends and comes again, and the dramatic ballet between cormorant and sardine repeats over and over, each time with an identical outcome. Gangs of sea lion pups harass the delicate and defeated creature.

As I levitate in the turquoise water, the cormorant's chase resonates with me, for I believe I will also be forced to return to the terrestrial world empty handed. Looking back in the direction of the boat, I feel a terrible ache. I know that I need to stall.

Another few minutes pass before the cormorant, the sardines, and the light finally align. For a photographer, it is a satisfying feeling when you can ignore the playback button and simply smile. Pleased with my persistence, and grateful for the experience, I swim back to the boat, marinating in the salt and sun of a grand moment in nature. I like to imagine that in all the chaos, the cormorant also found pleasure in her hunt.



@joannalentini