

Visitors to Grand Teton will journey down a unique "Video River"

Below:
Crew used a crane to capture footage of a moose crossing Snake River for the Grand Teton National Park visitors' center film, directed by David Vassar and shot by DP Christopher Tufty.

David Vassar made his first documentary film at age 19. He used a hand-cranked 16mm Bolex to capture the grandeur of Yosemite National Park in California.

More than 30 years later, Vassar is still capturing nature with a camera. His most recent project documents the breathtaking scenery and delicate ecosystems at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. The format, however, has changed. Vassar's Teton film will be seen by park visitors in a unique presentation.

ultra-fine grain KODAK VISION2 50D 5201 film. The camera was often mounted with a relatively wide-angle 14mm lens. Many scenes were captured from atop a 30-foot-high crane. Airplane footage was usually shot at 60 fps to smooth out the images, and usually from an altitude of about 300 feet above the deck. At other times they filmed at 100 fps at a lower altitude.

Because most aerial camera systems are not designed to shoot straight down, the filmmakers used an Italian-made, twin-engine plane that had previously been used for finding tuna in the open ocean. The Plexiglas nose cone and the bomb bay doors allowed for shooting directly downwards.

The film was converted for editing on an Avid system. The selects were scanned and assembled at full aperture at 4K resolution, and output to the unique aspect ratio required for the HD projection. Post-production is being handled at LaserPacific in Los Angeles.

"Using the full aperture means that we have some freedom in terms of repositioning," says Vassar. "We can move up or down



Without film, these images would look like oatmeal."

Nine high-definition projectors will beam the images up from below onto three 5-by-15 foot pieces of glass that form part of the floor in the visitors' center. Rear projection material sandwiched in the glass will catch and display the projected images. The filmmakers are calling the experience a "video river."

The river will be made up of images in an ultra-wide 3.75:1 aspect ratio.

"Given the aspect ratio, and the fact that the images must pass through a thick piece of glass, we decided that 35mm film was required," Vassar says. "We needed the highest image quality with as many pixels as possible. Without film, these images would look like oatmeal."

Vassar envisioned the unusual design of the "theater" in devising his approach to the photography. "If the audience is going to be standing on the images, it changes the way you frame the film," he says. "As often as possible, we wanted to replicate the point of view of the audience – so we decided to shoot the majority of the film looking straight down."

Vassar and cinematographer Christopher Tufty captured it on

within the frame to choose the best 3.85:1 rectangle."

In trying to communicate the incredible vistas and wildlife, Vassar and Tufty have found that the images work best when they are abstract or impressionistic. They have enhanced this effect by including time lapse star fields and reflections off water.

"We're creating images that often don't have a 'correct' up or a down," Vassar says. "As a result, the more abstract or impressionistic the shot the more successful the image. It's almost like looking at clouds. They become very arresting. It draws you in. The model that we've tried to follow is of a walk through the forest or back country. You come across a slow moving creek. You look into the creek and the creek takes you away into a transcendental experience."

As visitors enter the center, a static shot of a moving creek will be playing on the video river, along with the sound of running water. Every 20 minutes or so, the movie will run. "We hope it will have a meditative, relaxing effect for viewers," says Vassar.

The video river will debut at the park in June 2007. ■