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Nature's handiwork

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In "America the Beautiful," it sings of "spacious skies" and "purple mountain majesties."

When Huntington resident Jeff Ball lays eyes on that glory, he can't help but sing his own song, capturing that moment through a camera lens and sharing it with others.

Thankfully for us, that doesn't mean just e–mailing vacation pics to friends.

Whittled down from more than 1,800 images, Ball, a fine art photographer who specializes in landscape and astral photography, shares the voyage of two river trips in his new 18 photo exhibition, "Spirit of the San Juan River: River, Rocks and Ruins."

That exhibition opens at 5 p.m. today at Ball's studio at Pendleton Art Center, 1537–1539 Winchester Ave., Ashland.

Perhaps best known in the region for his astral photography, Ball took the photos on weeklong trips on the San Juan with Wild River Expeditions in October 2005 and again in May 2006.

The trips were part of photography workshops with well–known Phoenix–based landscape photographers Alain and Natalie Briot.

"I am trying to raise awareness of these special places where cell phones don't work," Ball said. "I guess that's the new definition of wilderness."

On the San Juan River, Ball found just that.

Born out of snow along Southern Colorado's Continental Divide, the San Juan winds through the northwest corner of New Mexico before bending into Utah near the Four Corners Monument.

A tributary of the better–known Colorado River, the San Juan snakes through the Grand Canyon, the San Juan then meanders through the sculpted painted canyons in southeast Utah before joining up with the Colorado under what is now Lake Powell, according to the Expedition's Web site.

On Ball's trips, they put in just below Bluff, Utah, and took out at Clay Hills, not far from Lake Powell and just north of Monument Valley.

A photographer for the past

10 years, Ball got really interested in landscape photography and increasingly he has been drawn to the rivers.

"I've looked for a lot of work done on rivers and there just isn't much," Ball said. "Everything has been done from the ground with the tripod, and one of the things the digital camera affords is to be able to shoot from the boat and capture these moments."

From the oar-driven rafts, Ball shot away and also hiked into many of the side canyons such as Slickhorn, Chinle and Oljeto Wash along the way, shooting the many Native American petroglyphs and unique rock formations carved by the river, wind and time.

Today at the opening, Ball will use maps and his photos to tell of the journeys.

For him, one of the hardest parts of the journey was editing down to 10 color and eight black-and-white photographs for the exhibition since he shot more than 1,800 images.

"Today's digital world is nice and then on one hand it's a real evildoer," Ball said. "In the old days a lot of the editorializing would have been done in the field. I maybe worked up 100 photos and then started paring them down from there. I was trying to select a story of images to represent the river and the archaeology."

Ball, who is now looking at doing the Yampa, the largest undammed tributary of the Colorado, and who is looking inward to rivers in West Virginia to shoot, said he feels his work is a subtle testimony.

"What I hope to bring is an awareness of God's beauty and to encourage good stewardship," Ball said. "I think in today's world that it is very hard for us to create moments of meditation and prayer, and I think we can in these wilderness areas."