



Self-care through nature photography **A visual journey through fall with a queer eye**

MARIO GASTELUM

Sometimes we take for granted the things that are around us. Sometimes we are just focused on our daily lives and connected to our digital devices. Sometimes we are inside our heads, overthinking that email or text we sent earlier, alienating ourselves from others and sheltering ourselves in our own thoughts and anxieties—Will they answer in time? Was my tone too friendly or rude? Should I change jobs? Did they like me? We are constantly so immersed in stress that we miss the beauty in our cities, but, most importantly, we miss the beauty of green spaces around us, forgetting to look up. Do you go out to parks in your city? Have you noticed the nature around you? Have you used your senses to experience it?

Mario Gastelum (he, him, el) has been involved with Latinx community work since 2010 and is passionate about arts, social justice, and mental health. ▲ [Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, Lake County, Illinois](#)

I consider myself an urban photographer, going to alleys and finding comfort and beauty in Chicago, where I live. In my work at a non-profit during the past year I focused on health initiatives. With the pandemic happening, the focus was on vaccines along with other vital issues, mental health, and air quality.

I did struggle with my own mental health, dealing with anxiety and stress constantly—remember those emails and texts from earlier. Although my partner, colleagues, and friends were there, I sometimes felt lonely. Especially working in a marginalized community, being Latino and gay I sometimes felt misunderstood and misrepresented. I found peace by talking to my partner, therapist, and colleagues, and I was introduced to the magic words of “self-care,” “community,” “walks,” “birder,” “nature,” “conservancy.” Finally, a dear friend and colleague introduced me to community groups for BIPOC birders, and another one for LGBTQIA+ people in nature. My whole attitude changed.

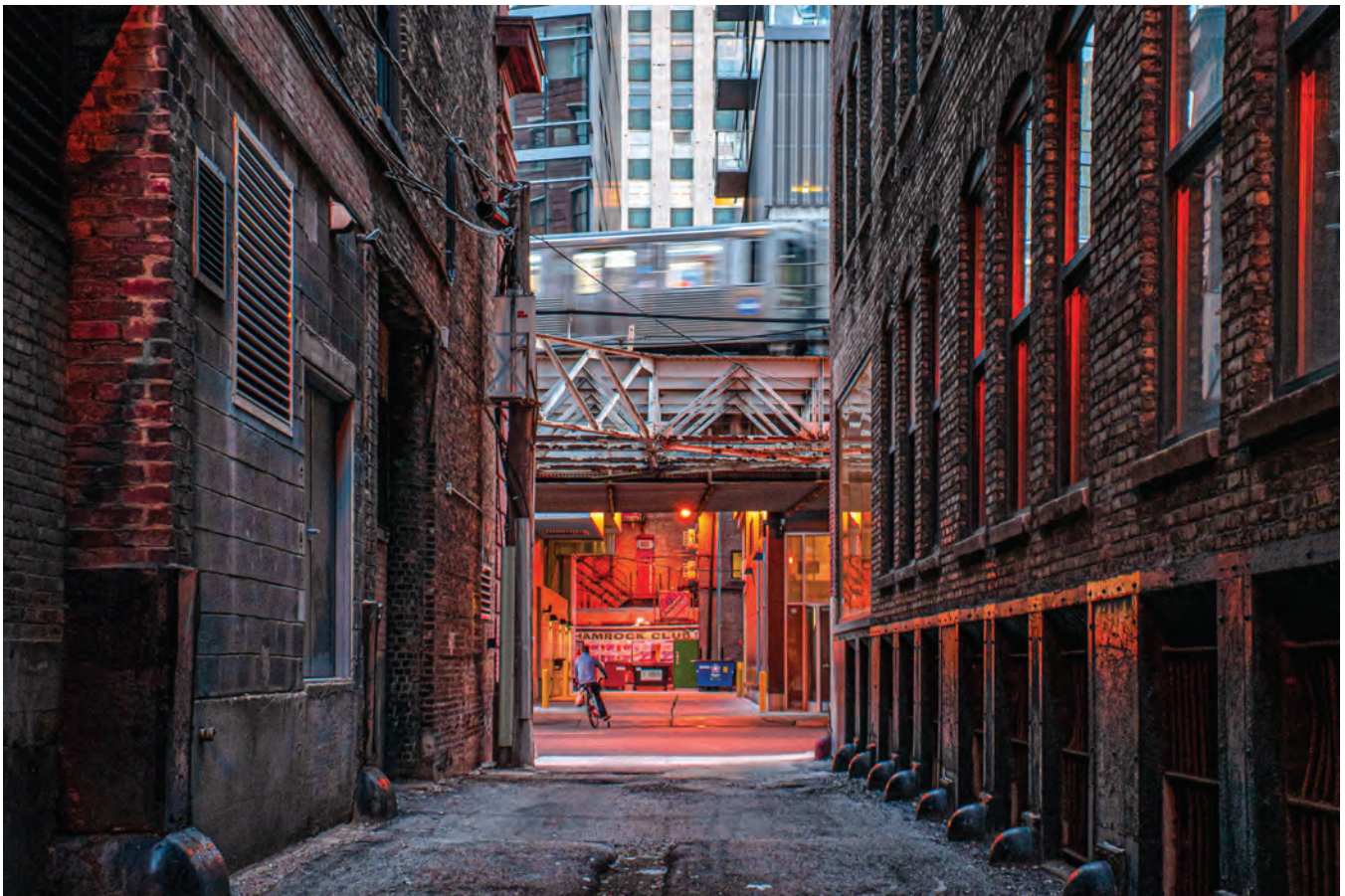
I often put on my headphones, blast some music, and venture into the city. One fall day, I was so stressed out and anxious from work that I went for a walk to take pictures and practice self-care at a park I recently visited with one of the groups mentioned above. My thoughts were so loud that I had to put some deep house music on my headphones, no lyrics. It helped for a bit. Suddenly, when reaching to my camera to shoot, the camera strap yanked the headphones out of my ears. I bent over to pick them up and I started noticing and focusing on the sounds of the park, wind, lake, and birds. It was also a quiet afternoon, so all nature sounds were heightened and relaxing. My sense of smell and sight started paying more attention and I noticed my breathing changed. I was calm. It made me remember a previous LGBTQIA+ walk at the Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, part of Edward L. Ryerson Conservation Area, a Lake County Forest Preserve in Lake County, Illinois. The colors of fall were like being in a TV commercial for 4K screens.

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Here, I share a few of these pictures so that you can have your own visual journey. Hopefully this serves as an invitation for you to experience nature wherever you are and join your community. So, buckle up! The following pictures will illustrate the journey from urban to nature photography, finding nature in an urban context, community, and self-care. Remember that you are not alone, we are OUT there, in conservancy, in community, in health, and with you.

For the full collection of these pictures, visit my portfolio at megastelum.myportfolio.com.

MORE ↓



Commuting, whether by bike, train, car, walking, or something else, is an activity in our daily lives that could be either anxiety inducing, or relaxing—if it takes us to the places we want to be.
▲ River North, Chicago, Illinois



▲ Ulysses S. Grant Monument, Lincoln Park, Chicago, Illinois



▲ Lincoln Park, Chicago, Illinois

Nature in an urban context, City and Monuments.



Into the woods and into the immersive colors of Fall!
▲ ▼ Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, Lake County, Illinois





Look up

▲ ▼ Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, Lake County, Illinois





... look down too!
Little things are everywhere





Curious birds

▲ Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, Illinois ▼ West Ridge Nature Park, Chicago, Illinois





Coexisting

▲ Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, Illinois ▼ West Ridge Nature Park, Chicago, Illinois





▲ West Ridge Nature Park, Chicago, Illinois



▲ West Ridge Nature Park, Chicago, Illinois



▲ Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, Lake County, Illinois



Flocks of sandhill cranes migrate from the north to Georgia and Florida, making their stopover in Jasper County, Indiana.
▲ ▼ Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Area, Medaryville, Indiana





▲ Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, Lake County, Illinois



▲ Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Area, Medaryville, Indiana

Finding Community—Diverse and colorful community

▼ Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, Illinois



▼ Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, Illinois





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▲ West Ridge Nature Park, Chicago, Illinois ▼ Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, Illinois





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On the cover of this issue

“Strength,” a Tarot illustration representing a radiation of power coupled with inner understanding and love. | [HENRY CRAWFORD ADAMS](http://henrycrawfordadams.com)