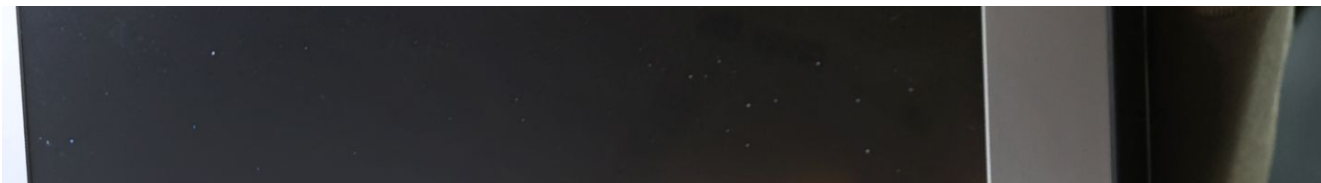


RI NEWS

Rhode Island photographer races to capture the fading lighthouse lights

David Zapatka has photographed 182 of the nation's 800 active lighthouses at night, but it's a race against time: The Coast Guard is shutting down lighthouses and climate change is destroying them

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 29, 2021, 6:00 a.m.





Rhode Island photographer and videographer David Zapatka is on a quest to photograph all 800 lighthouses still in use in the nation. He displayed two photographs, one of Plum Beach Lighthouse in Rhode Island (top) and the other of Duxbury Pier Light, nicknamed the "Bug Light," in Plymouth. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

NORTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. — For storm-tossed mariners, lighthouses long served as beacons of hope, their beams slicing through fog and darkness, illuminating the way to safe harbor.

But in an age of satellites and GPS navigation, the landmark lights are being rendered redundant, victims not only of changing technology but also of climate change, their lights extinguished by rising seas, raging storms, and government bureaucrats.

So David Zapatka — a veteran cameraman, photographer, and lighthouse aficionado who lives in North Kingstown — finds himself in a race against time, engaged in a midnight quest to photograph the nation's 800 working lighthouses at night, beneath the stars.

So far, he has shot 182 lighthouses in 18 states. At the wheel of a donated RV named "Ruthie," he is hoping to photograph the remaining 618 before many of them are shut

down, as part of a United States Lighthouse Society project.

“The preservation part of it is the most important part for me,” Zapatka said. “We are preserving history that is disappearing before our eyes.”

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Rhode Island photographer and videographer David Zapatka, outside his 22-foot-long RV named "Ruthie." DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

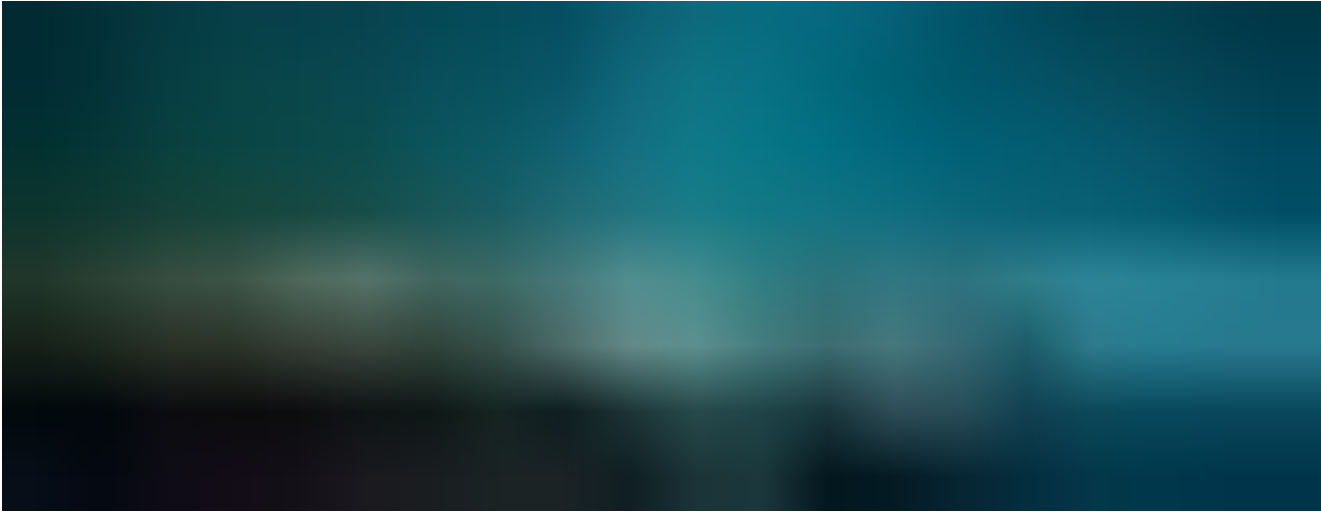
Sitting in the RV on Monday, he noted that sailors have relied on lighthouses for hundreds of years. "It's that beacon in a storm. It's hope. No matter how bad the storm, no matter how bad the conditions, the lighthouses are still there," he said, pausing. "Or, at least, they used to be."

At one point, the United States had twice as many active lighthouses. But with the advent of modern navigation equipment, the Coast Guard began shutting them off and selling them, Zapatka said.

In some cases, lighthouses have been saved by private individuals and preservation groups.

For instance, the Coast Guard planned to demolish the keeper's house at the Ram Island Lighthouse near Boothbay Harbor, Maine, he said. But a local man named George McEvoy joined with others to preserve the lighthouse. And three months ago, Zapatka captured a stunning image of the Ram Island Lighthouse, with its 100-foot-long pier, beneath the Milky Way.





Photograph taken by David Zapatka of the Ram Island Lighthouse near Boothbay Harbor, Maine. COURTESY OF DAVID ZAPATKA

While lighthouses can be expensive to maintain, the government would be wise to keep them in working order, Zapatka said, noting the Russians have threatened to shoot down GPS satellites. “How many of us would be completely lost, on many different levels, if GPS disappeared?” he said. “Many people don’t know how to read maps anymore.”

Meanwhile, climate change is exacting a toll, with rising seas and powerful storms lashing lighthouses, Zapatka said.

Recently, the Great Lakes rose to their highest levels in a century, posing a threat to lighthouses in Michigan, he said. While people associate lighthouses with Maine, Michigan has more lighthouses than any other state, with 116 compared to Maine’s 63 lighthouses, he said.

Powerful storms have already claimed some lighthouses, Zapatka said. For example, a 32-foot wave during superstorm Sandy wiped out the Old Orchard Shoal Lighthouse in 2012. Zapatka said that to his knowledge, it had never been photographed at night.

Over the years, many photographers have focused their lenses on lighthouses. But most of those shots were taken during the day, and film limited the quality of shots taken at night, Zapatka said. With film, camera shutters remained open so long that, as a result of the earth’s rotation, stars appear to streak, he explained.

But digital cameras are a game changer, Zapatka said. Now, he can capture vivid images of lighthouses along with pinpoint stars, he said, adding that he has found the “sweet spot” in leaving the lens open for 20 seconds.

Zapatka’s lighthouse journey began in 1993 when his family moved from Warwick to North Kingstown, and he discovered the “decaying but photogenic” Plum Beach Lighthouse nearby in Narragansett Bay. He took dozens of photos of the “sad old” structure near the Jamestown Verrazzano Bridge.

In 1999, [the Friends of Plum Beach Lighthouse](#) received the deed from the State of Rhode Island. And Zapatka, who has worked for 10 years as a cameraman for local television stations and 20 years for national networks, offered to shoot a documentary about the renovation. That work was completed in 2003, with the lighthouse transformed and its beacon lit for the first time in 60 years.



Photograph taken by David Zapatka of the Plum Beach Lighthouse and the Jamestown Verrazzano Bridge COURTESY OF DAVID ZAPATKA

In 2004, Zapatka became president of the Friends of the Plum Beach Lighthouse. He hatched the idea for the Rhode Island lighthouse license plate, which has raised more than \$250,000 for the Plum Beach Lighthouse .

In 2013, Zapatka and his wife were on their boat in Narragansett Bay when he started thinking about taking photos of the Dutch Island Lighthouse under the stars. He took shots of the beacon at night, using a high-end Nikon camera that he had for CBS Sports projects, and showed the images to some Coast Guard members he knew.

“They were amazed at what I captured, but it didn’t hit me why,” Zapatka said. “I came to understand that lighthouse pictures just don’t exist at nighttime. Think of the irony: That is when they do all their work.”

Since then, Zapatka has released two coffee table books, “Stars & Lights: Darkest of Dark Nights,” and “USA Stars & Lights: Portraits from the Dark.”




Rhode Island photographer and videographer David Zapatka seated inside a RV with his camera equipment and his published photography books on lighthouses. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

So far, he has taken photos of all 16 lighthouses in Rhode Island that are lit as aids to navigation. Several months ago, he finished shooting all 43 active lighthouses in Massachusetts. He's also photographed 12 of the 14 in Connecticut, and 25 of the 63 in Maine.

But now Zapatka is undertaking the "daunting task" of photographing all 800 active lighthouses in the United States at night. To fund the project, he is working with the [United States Lighthouse Society](#), applying for grants and agreeing to donate the original photos to the nonprofit while retaining the right to sell prints.

Last spring, an educator in the lighthouse society, Elinor DeWire, donated a 20-year-old, 22-foot-long RV for use on the project, Zapatka said. The RV is named "Ruthie" for DeWire's mother, and Ruth also happens to be Zapatka's mother's name. "In this age of the pandemic, Ruthie is a godsend," he said.





Zapatka, inside an RV with his camera equipment, is on a quest to photograph all 800 lighthouses still in use in the nation. With a 22-foot-long RV named "Ruthie," he continues his journey. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Two weeks ago, Zapatka completed a 1,300-mile round-trip to Virginia to photograph two lighthouses, and he hopes to head to North Carolina in the first weeks of the new year to add to the collection.

Getting there is just the start of the challenge. In many cases, there is no land around the lighthouses, so Zapatka asked a local welder, Rob Winters of Coastal Iron Works, to fashion a 20-foot-tall tripod. Now, he can drop two anchors and steady his camera atop the tripod in pretty deep water.

Zapatka waits for perfect conditions. That means a new moon or no moon, clear skies, and calm seas. And that means shooting between an hour-and-a-half after sunset and an hour-and-a-half before sunrise.

He wears a climbing helmet with a headlamp, along with a personal flotation device and an emergency-position-indicating radio beacon, which would send a signal if he needed to be rescued.

Sometimes, it can take years to secure access, and to be at the right place at the right time.

Zapatka said the most difficult lighthouse to photograph was [Minot's Ledge Light](#), which sits in "very rocky waters" off the coast of Cohasset, with no land nearby.



Photograph taken by David Zapatka of Minot's Ledge Light, off the coast of Cohasset. COURTESY OF DAVID ZAPATKA

He analyzed navigation charts and photographs, noticing that in some photos rocks appear fairly close to the lighthouse. So he went to see the harbormaster, Lorren Gibbons, and told her: “I know you will think I’m crazy, but I really want to shoot the lighthouse and I need your help. There’s a pile of rocks only at the lowest of low tides, so I need to be on those rocks at the new moon at low tide.’

“She looked at me and smiled.”

On the first attempt, Zapatka and his friend Sean Daly, a longtime Rhode Island TV news reporter, were turned back by large waves crashing over the rocks. But on a second attempt, they landed the shot: Minot’s Ledge Light — radiant against a brilliant tapestry of stars, its beam illuminating the water, with jagged rocks in the foreground.

“It’s a sense of accomplishment because it has never been done before with so many of these lighthouses,” Zapatka said. “The race against time is so important. It’s about preserving it for history.”

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