

THE STORY OF A PHOTOGRAPH

Asperatus Clouds Over New Zealand



By Witta Priester

Photos © Witta Priester

Sometimes you are lucky. I was in the right place, at the right time, with the right skills! It was Hanmer Springs, New Zealand, March 2005.

My husband and I were spending the weekend with friends. Everyone was relaxing before dinner. My hubby said: "You've got to come see these clouds." I replied, "I'm reading a really good book. Thanks anyway." Fortunately, he persisted, and eventually I went out onto the deck. The sky WAS amazing, and it got weirder by the minute. Here's a photo from early on.

The clouds were in layers, with separately defined areas, and they were slowly building up. As time went on they got darker, colorful, and ominous as the late afternoon sun lit them from below. Surprisingly, there was neither wind nor rain, eventually it just got dark.

I took some photos from the deck with my camera of the day, a 4 megapixel point-and-shoot. We drove around town, looking for a more photogenic spot, like someplace with a bit of foreground interest. No luck there. Then again, maybe this cloud formation didn't need much foreground. The deck photo with its small trees at the bottom does provide a sense of scale.

In late 2006, I joined Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/wittap/>).

I wanted to share my photos with friends and anyone else who could manage to find my work. I uploaded this photo, among others, in a small size.

In 2009, out of the blue, the photo went viral. It showed up on Pinterest, pinned and repinned. It was also posted on other websites such as Reddit, Tumblr, and on people's Facebook pages. No one asked permission. I only learned about this because many folks posted my photo with its Flickr link imbedded, so if someone actually clicked on the photo to see a larger version, the viewer would end up at my Flickr page. A few of these visitors left comments, which led me to discover the "statistics" page and the links within the postings.

Asperatus clouds over New Zealand Photograph © Witta Priester. All rights reserved.

Thereafter, several requests came for permission to use the photo, while others used the photo without asking. For example, permission was granted to publish the photo in a flying guide for pilots in Europe, on the cover of a CD for a small East Coast band, and on the Matador website in an article on cloud formations.

A happy coincidence is that this type of cloud formation is both rare and unique. Indeed, it might get its own classification. Some in the Cloud Appreciation Society are pushing to classify this as a new cloud type—an Asperatus Cloud. See a recent article on the Taxonomy Blog: <http://taxodiary.com/2013/11/a-cloud-drifting-toward-a-classification/>.

In February 2013, NASA (yes, the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration!) contacted me and wanted to use my photo as the Astronomy Photo of the Day (APOD). I was pleased with their request, sent them a larger file, and the photo was the APOD on February 27, 2013. <http://apod.nasa.gov/apod/ap130227.html>

They included a scientific write-up about the clouds, along with attribution credit and a link to my Flickr page. APOD gets about a million hits a day, so this meant I had a whole day of fame! I never asked my NASA contact where they initially came across the photo, but I assume it was on one of those other places, rather than my little Flickr photostream.

With this sort of broad exposure, all sorts of things happen. For example, people have contacted me about "misuse." Once you put a photo on the web, you give up control of where your photo lives, or what happens with it.

I have a number of misuse stories to share. First off, a father wrote to me that he had "checked me out" and though I seemed to be a "reputable person" he wanted to chastise me for using his



Clouds early on



Asperatus Clouds over New Zealand

son's photo on the APOD. His sixteen-year-old son had told him, and swore, that he took the photo in their backyard, so why had I not given credit to his son? I wrote him back and can only hope he had a serious talk with his darling boy.

Then I got an email telling me that a woman had entered my photo in a State Fair, and won first-place! Someone (probably a disappointed competitor) went to the trouble of looking for this photo online and tracking me down! At my request, the Fair people did pursue this misuse. Eventually, the entrant received a letter, asking for the ribbon and prize money back, and was banned for two years. (She was not a PSA member.)

Then someone on Facebook, with quite a few followers, posted my photo (among others) and claimed it as his own; again a stranger made the effort to track me down. The thief quickly removed my photo along with my admonishing comments from his Facebook page.

I have to admit that I'm confused by these behaviors. What is the motivation? Does it really feel good to get recognized for something one has not actually done?

Aside from individuals, there is organization and commercial misuse. In 2014 there was a post of my photo on the KOMO TV (a Seattle NBC affiliate) Facebook page by their weatherman. There was no attribution. Someone asked about it, so he attributed it to a person who had put my photo on their Reddit webpage. A friend saw the KOMO post and contacted me. I naturally gave KOMO News an earful and can only hope they do their homework next time: They should know better. Similarly, Picture Correct, a respected photography site, initially posted my photo as their "Photo of the Day" without asking and without any attribution!

A local photographer friend saw the post, contacted me, and once I emailed them, this was quickly corrected.

Clearly, people can be careless, or lazy, or perhaps they just don't care or appreciate that they are using someone else's art work without permission. This seems to apply to even those who should know better.

In each of these instances, someone contacted me and that's why I have these tales to tell. I think it is reasonable to assume that what I know is just a small part of the full story. So please be forewarned.

These stories are good reasons to post only small photo files and to watermark them. By the way, you can search for copies of photos on line. TinEye, (<http://www.tineye.com/>) is a free, reverse-image search engine that finds copies of a photo on the web. (This photo currently has more than 350 copies online.)

Still, I continue posting my images on Flickr. Aside from the fun of sharing my work and making Flickr "friends," there are additional benefits. I've sold the *Asperatus Clouds over New Zealand* photo three times: a Japanese company for use in a children's text book; the German magazine, *Natur*, for their November 2013 magazine cover; and National Geographic Explorer, their kid's magazine, used my photo in their March 2015 issue, and Scholastic Magazine published the image in one of their April 2015 issues.

The realization of how far afield a photo can go, led me to actually log onto the US Copyright Office website. I registered this cloud photo, along with a series of others taken that afternoon, and I now have an official registered copyright.

As you can see, photography can lead you to places you never imagined. Who knows what's next?

Note: Of course there were other photographers out there that afternoon, taking similar photos. If you saw that sky, wouldn't you? There are a couple of photos of these particular clouds on the Cloud Appreciation Society website. Also, a photographer and owner of a restaurant in Hanmer Springs, New Zealand has prints on the walls and sells his version of that sky.