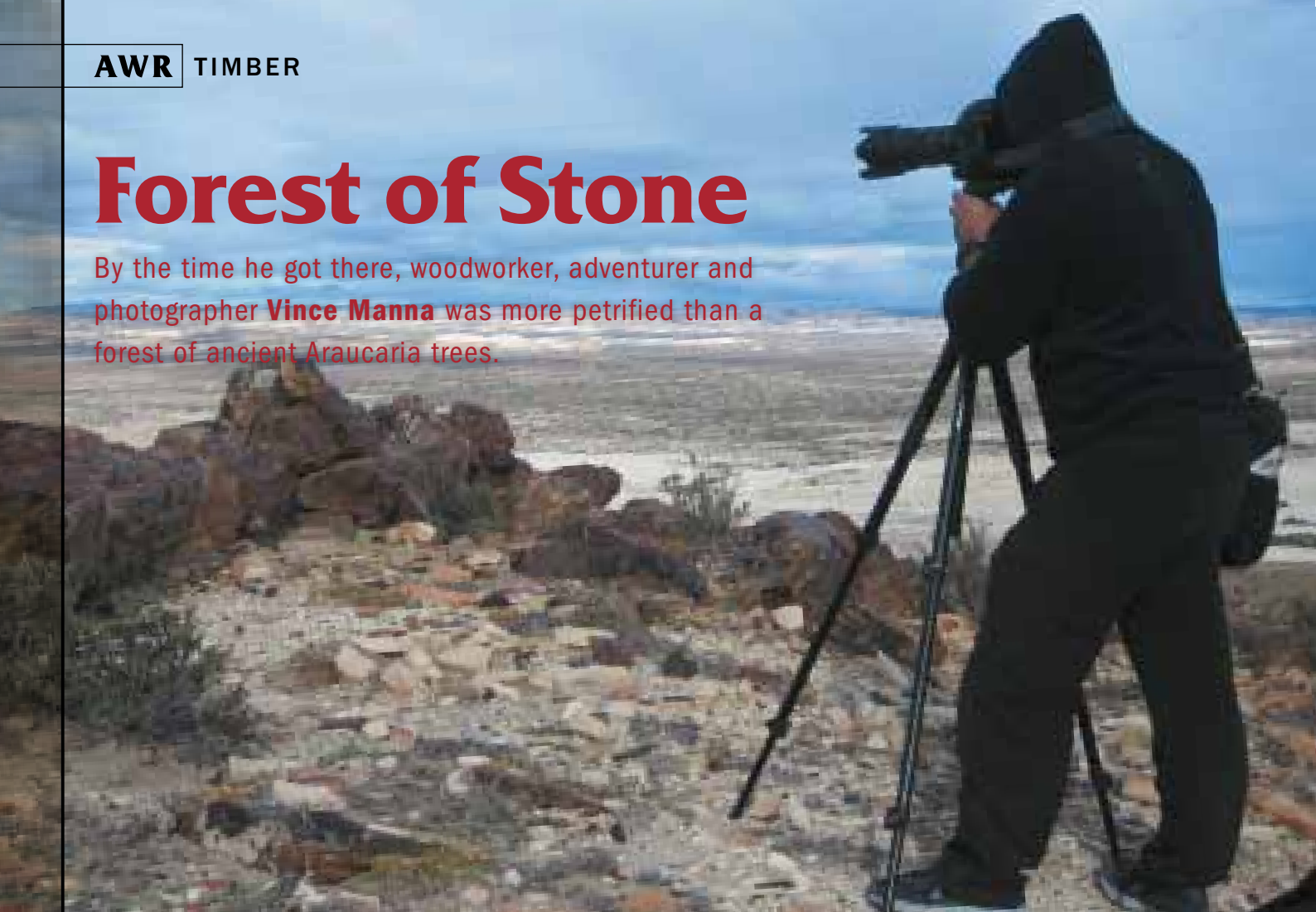


# Forest of Stone

By the time he got there, woodworker, adventurer and photographer **Vince Manna** was more petrified than a forest of ancient *Araucaria* trees.



**A**t the end of 2009 I was making my way down the coast of Argentina with Paula, my travelling companion. We were heading south to Ushuaia to board a ship bound for Antarctica. There is a lot to see in Argentina but for me none can match the beauty of the *Bosque Petrificados* (Petrified Forest). I knew of its approximate location but not exactly how to get there. The plan was to travel by bus to Caleta Olivia and then hire a vehicle to get us there.

As soon as we got off the bus we started looking for a taxi driver who knew the way. Most of the drivers we approached were unfamiliar with the location of the forest, let alone its existence. Finally, we met a taxi driver who seemed interested to help. Jessica was young and eager to earn a much higher than normal fee. She was also not fazed by the thought of an adventure, so we all headed off to a nearby tourist information centre to find out the best way to get there.

I have done all kinds of woodwork for over twenty years but in recent years photographing wild-life and landscapes has been my focus. I'm also a keen wood collector so photographing trees in their natural

surroundings is doubly interesting to me.

I particularly wanted to photograph the ancient *Araucaria* trees at dawn, adding pressure to an already tight schedule. To travel 300 kilometres to the forest in time for a 5.30am sunrise meant we would have to leave at around 2am that night, and even then we'd be pushing it.

Once we had received permission from the park managers to enter the forest prior to dawn we stocked up on food and drink and, after a one hour long 'night's' sleep, set off.

Getting there late was not an option. After about an hour I asked Jessica if we would make it by sunrise. She assured us we would, but the fact she was hitting speeds in excess of 160km an hour gave us cause for concern, especially as it was pitch black outside. Jessica was steering with one hand and sipping hot coffee from the other, and as we chatted Paula thought to ask how old she was, and how long had she been driving? 'Twenty two years old', and 'one week as a taxi driver', she replied...our faces said what the other was thinking.

Sealed roads turned into bumpy and dusty dirt tracks with still much ground

to cover. On the horizon we could see a red line of light growing closer to a sunrise and it guided us somewhat. We arrived just in time. To witness the colours of dawn breaking over the fallen tree giants that had been turned to stone millions of years ago was an extremely moving experience that no other sunrise I have witnessed since has matched.

I spent the next few hours marvelling at the thousands of logs that had been revealed and repositioned by wind, water and erosion over such a huge amount of time. By late morning, clouds rolled in, the wind reached chilling point and that along with the sand that blew with it made being there challenging. At the end of the day the skies cleared again, rewarding us with a sunset that almost equalled the dawn we had witnessed.

*Photos: Vince Manna. With thanks to Pablo Agnone, Administracion de parques Nacionales, Santa Cruz, Argentina, who supplied information and assistance with my research and visit.*

Vince Manna is furniture maker as well as an adventurer and photographer. Contact him via: [www.diverseimpressions.com](http://www.diverseimpressions.com)





The stunning view as dawn breaks over the Bosques Petrificados. **Opposite:** Vince Manna captures the stony landscape. **Below:** 'A red line of light growing closer to a sunrise' guided the travellers.

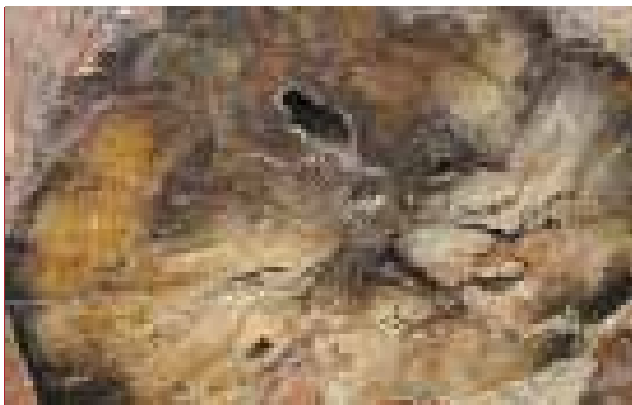


## BOSQUES PETRIFICADOS

The Patagonian *Bosques Petrificados* is one of Argentina's official National Natural Monuments. With the discovery of oil in the region in the early 19th century came visitors—geologists, researchers and travellers, one of whom, in 1922, made mention of a 'place with trees of stone'. It wasn't until 1954 however that Argentina's government placed it under the protection of its National Parks Administration.

Formed as a result of volcanic eruptions at the start of the Cretacic period, the huge then-existing *Araucaria* forest was 'frozen in time', only to be laid slowly bare by the action of wind and rain. Huge fallen 'logs' up to two metres in diameter lie exposed. In prehistoric times hunter gatherers used the fossil wood to make stone tools.

Interestingly, *Araucaria araucana*, otherwise known as monkey puzzle, is often referred to as a living fossil because it can live for up to 1,000 years.



## WHAT IS PETRIFICATION?

Petrified wood is wood that has literally turned into stone by means of a process called petrification or permineralisation. Typically trees buried under layers of volcanic lava and ash are deprived of oxygen. Because decomposition can't take place aerobically the cells of the tree are eventually replaced in a kind of osmotic process with minerals present in water such as silica and quartz. Elements such as copper, iron, manganese, cobalt and carbon can give petrified wood a coloured appearance.