

# CURRENT SCIENCE

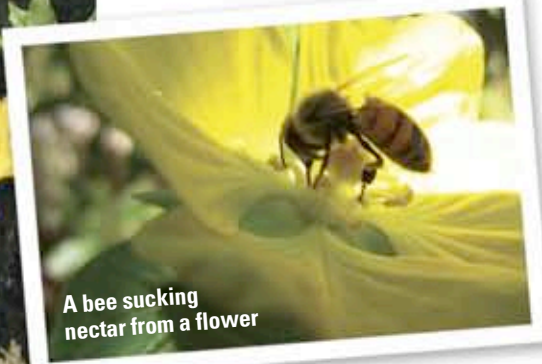
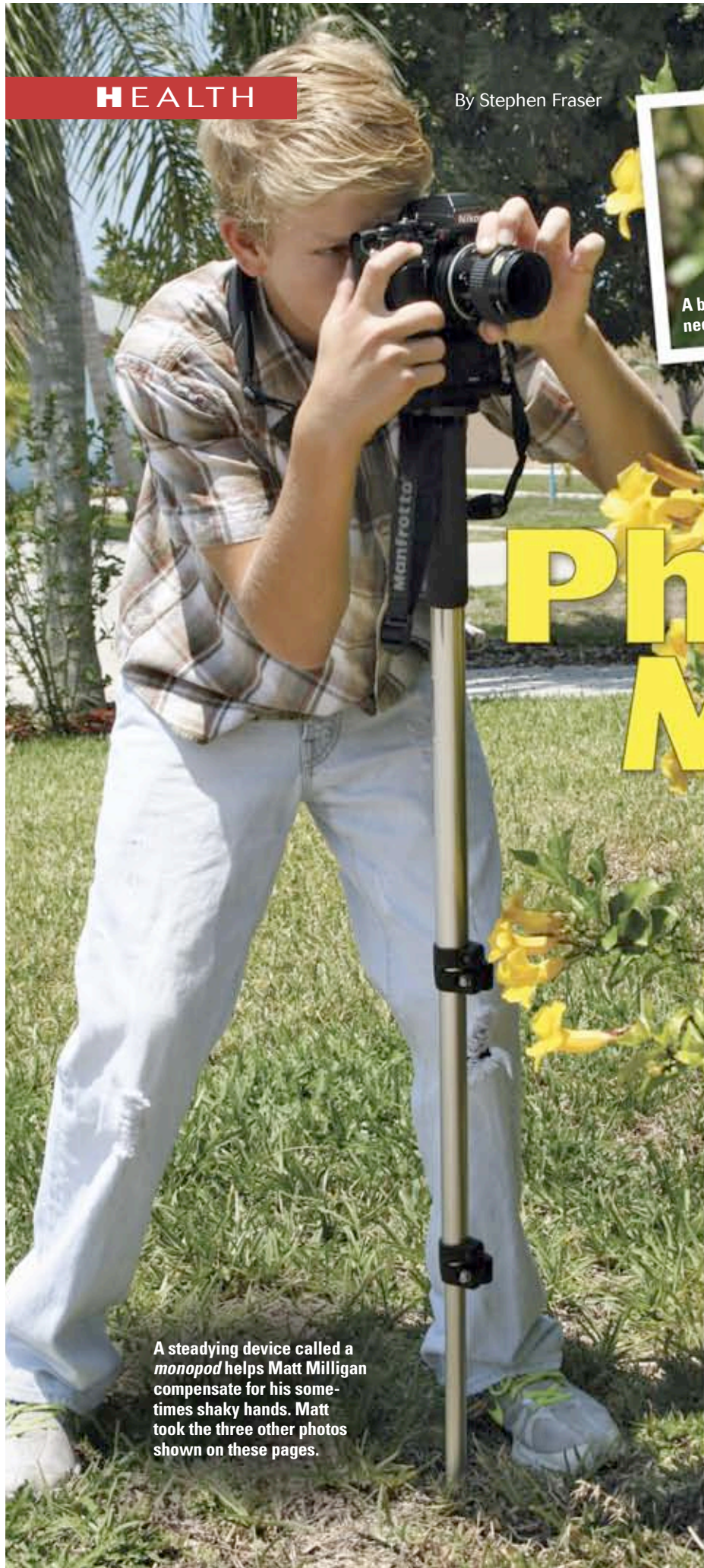
October 2, 2009 • Vol. 95 • Issue 3 [www.weeklyreader.com](http://www.weeklyreader.com)

Matt Milligan's  
striking pictures  
show no traces  
of his disability.

## Photo Matt



By Stephen Fraser



A bee sucking nectar from a flower

Matt Milligan's striking pictures show no traces of his disability.

# Photo Matt

**T**wo years ago, Matt Milligan took his first photography class. Twelve years old at the time, Matt was the youngest student in a class of mostly senior citizens. But his pictures excelled compared with everyone else's. "He demonstrated amazing skills," says Garth Francis, the instructor. "I was very impressed with what he came back with just after the first class."

Matt's skills were all the more impressive because he has *cerebral palsy (CP)*, a form of brain damage that makes the muscles difficult to control. Photographers need steady hands, and Matt's hands shake. But with remarkable determination and the help of special equipment, Matt is proving that his artistic ability is secure. He has exhibited and sold photos at art shows in his hometown of Bonita Springs, Fla., and he just shot his first print magazine photos—for this issue of *Current Science*.

A steadying device called a *monopod* helps Matt Milligan compensate for his sometimes shaky hands. Matt took the three other photos shown on these pages.

All photos courtesy of Matthew Milligan



Old, abandoned trucks in rural Tennessee

### EARLY DIAGNOSIS

Matt's parents suspected that Matt might have some kind of disability when he was a toddler. "Instead of falling back on his bottom, like most babies would, he fell over like a tree!" says his mother, Lisa Milligan. "He also drooled a lot."

Matt's early diagnosis was typical. Most cases of CP are identified during infancy or early childhood because CP is usually a *congenital* condition—present at birth. Only a small number of cases result from head injuries or infectious diseases during the first months or years of life. Matt wasn't breathing when he was born, and the resulting lack of oxygen might have been what damaged his brain.

As many as 10,000 infants are born with CP in the United States every year. The symptoms vary widely from person to person. In some people, the muscles are stiff and difficult to relax. Other people have trouble maintaining their balance or controlling their voluntary movements. Still others walk on their toes or with one foot or leg dragging. In the most severe cases, CP renders a person *quadriplegic*—unable to move any of the limbs.

"There is no cure for cerebral palsy," says John Osterman, a pediatric neurologist from Fort Myers, Fla., who treats Matt. But physical therapy, speech therapy, braces, and surgery are all prescribed to lessen the symptoms and help people deal with the challenges of day-to-day living.

"Running and keeping my balance was my biggest struggle when I was little," says Matt. "Now it's speech and fine motor skills."

When Matt was a kid, his doctors predicted that he might never ride a bike or run. Were they wrong! Although it can be difficult for Matt to keep up with his brothers, he now rides a motorbike and has competed in a Special Olympics 15-mile run.

"Matt is very determined," notes his mother. She says Osterman told her that Matt has made more progress than any other CP patient he has known.

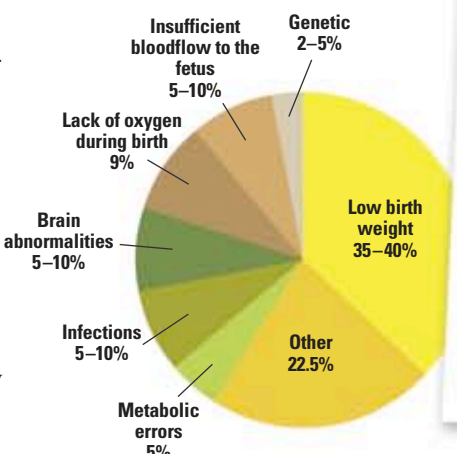
### NATURAL GIFT

Matt first tried his hand at photography when he was 9. The occasion was his brother's graduation from flight school. Matt's father, Mark Milligan, had acquired a new digital camera, and Matt asked him whether he could have his old Minolta 35mm film camera.

Matt's parents had to help him hold the Minolta. Even then, they weren't sure how well the photos would turn out. It was clear when the pictures came back from the developer, though, that Matt had a natural gift.

Today, Matt owns two cameras, a Canon EOS Rebel digital camera and a Nikon F3 film camera. "Photography is sometimes hard for me," he explains. "When I'm taking pictures, my hands shake. Sometimes, my pictures turn out real blurry." To compensate, Matt takes multiple shots of each

Cerebral palsy, a form of brain damage that makes the muscles difficult to control, has many causes. (Metabolic errors are disorders in which the body cannot carry out certain chemical reactions.)



subject. He also uses a *monopod*, a steadying device that's "like a tripod but more compact and with one leg instead of three," he says. He hopes one day to own an *image stabilization lens*, which contains sensors that correct for camera movements, particularly at slow *shutter speeds*. Shutter speed is the length of time the camera's shutter is open, exposing the camera's film or image sensor to outside light. The slower the shutter speed, the longer the shutter is open.

In addition to exhibiting his work at art shows, Matt recently won first prize in a contest sponsored by *Breakaway*, an online magazine for boys. "Matt has an enthusiasm for his craft, a good eye for composition, and an aggressive way of pursuing his subjects—he just doesn't wait for something to happen," says Francis, the instructor.

Matt's long-term plan is to study photography at an art school or a college, then make his living as a news photographer. Meanwhile, he continues to hone his skills by scouting the neighboring woods and beaches, shooting pictures of wildlife and scenery. "You just have to try, try, try again until you can do it and see your dreams." **CS**



A great white egret (foreground) and a wood stork at the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Florida