



Wildlife photography captive versus wild ?

I'm often asked question should we photograph captive animals or should we, as wildlife photographers, concentrate solely on wildlife photographed in the natural world.

This is a difficult and highly controversial topic for many reasons. Firstly, many animals we see in "collections" are kept in totally inappropriate conditions and nobody with an interest in wildlife could ever want to support that and secondly there are the purists who say that only wild counts and "real wildlife photographers" only shoot wild animals and to do anything else means you're not a true wildlife photographer. As with everything however there is always a middle ground and whilst I'm not wanting to get involved in any of the controversial and difficult conversations I felt it useful to share a few thoughts here.



To develop one's technical camera skill and craft as a wildlife photographer you need to practise and be able to reduce some of the variables. In an article in the musings section on my website entitled how I select keepers - click [here](#) to read the article or visit my website and scroll down through the musings section to this article - I talked about how in my early days of wildlife photography I had spent many hours trying to photograph a wild otter. At this point in the 70's otters were to very low ebb and I sat for more than 20 hours over seven days and only got the minutest

glimpse of an otter. I was pleased with my photographs and the moment will stay in my mind for ever but if I had developed my skill further beforehand I am sure I would have achieved better results. Certain wildlife subjects, such as these mountain hare in the snow, can and only be photographed in the wild but developing your skill and producing excellent photographs of captive animals along the way is certainly one way of improving your opportunities for success in similar situations.



I deliberately run a number of workshops at centres I have carefully chosen where the wildlife is very well kept, the conditions are as natural as possible and the enclosures the animals are kept in are spacious and constructed carefully to be as similar to the natural world as possible. The centres and the fact that I keep the numbers on my workshops to a minimum ensure that we can meet both goals of developing one's craft and obtaining photographs of stress free animals. The minimum numbers and the fact that I involve specialist animal handlers means I can support and teach each and every individual to develop their photography independent of their individual skill level. When we are therefore lucky enough to be able to photograph animals in the wild we have the skills which I did not have when confronted with that otter in the 70s. Further the way the animals are kept in naturalistic surroundings at centres like these means we can at the same time achieve some fantastic photographs of animals which would be great deal more difficult in the wild. I have never for example managed to photograph water shrews in the wild but have done very successfully in captivity. I'm about to embark on a project to photograph them underwater and whilst I know some have done this in the wild I will use captive specimens and be very honest about that.



There is another consideration as well and whilst I know this is more controversial among some wildlife photographers I think it's important to stress it here. It used to be the case that wildlife photography was about capturing images of wildlife in a natural situation to illustrate that animal, its behaviour and its environment. In more recent years many of us are seeing photography more as an art form rather than a scientific process of simply capturing an image. In truth I'm guessing that's always been the case for example when a painter like Landseer paints an image of the red stag (Monarch of the Glen) in the Highlands of Scotland he is drawing upon his experience and observation of the wild but also his undoubted skill as a painter. He probably has observed red stags in the mountains of Scotland but with this brings to the canvas his experience and skill as an artist to produce an enduring image. The otter in this photograph was a captive otter at the centre I use in Devon. I do hope though that all my time studying and observing wild otters together with time spent mastering my technique has helped me produce an image which, whilst I will never pass off as wild, is a pleasing and naturalistic image of an amazing creature.



To that end my view on what is and is not a wildlife photograph has changed over the years and indeed I would go so far as to say the same is true of all genres of photography. Whilst I am still an ardent naturalist and professional zoologist I also believe, if it's not too pompous a quote, that I'm an artist producing images rather than just a scientist collecting data. I use the definition very carefully because I have always believed that I am first and foremost a naturalist who takes photographs rather than a photographer who specialises in wildlife. This is something that has always been important to me because I believe that the naturalist taking photographs by virtue of understanding the subject he or she is photographing produces better work. Landseer and many of the great artists produce the images they do because they spent many hours studying the subject and know it well. Having said all of that what I'm trying to do with my wildlife photography is to share the wonder of the subject I'm photographing and the passion I have for my area photography. I often quote a wonderful fine art photographer called Lisa Langell who told me that

“Photography isn't just documenting that you saw it – its capturing how you experienced the moment”

This is very much what my photography is now, it's very much about capturing and sharing a moment and how I experienced it. To that end just as Landseer bought his experience and skill as a painter I hope I bring my experience and skill as a photographer to the images I produce.

Now moving on to whether something should be considered as a wildlife photograph if it indeed is a captive animal is a lot more tricky. Firstly and of paramount importance I never believe that somebody should ever pass off a captive shot as a wild shot. Honesty has got to be the first rule that all photographers have to live by where that be wildlife or otherwise. Failure to do so not only deceives the audience but much more importantly will destroy your reputation in a moment. Take for example José Luis Rodriguez who entered a photograph of a wolf jumping over a gate in the BBC wildlife photographer of the year competition claiming it to be wild but subsequently was found to be fraudulent. If you remember the story the wolf was in fact hired from a wildlife park in Madrid. Not only did he deceive the judges, something which is inexcusable, and accept the prize but he has now paid for it with his reputation.

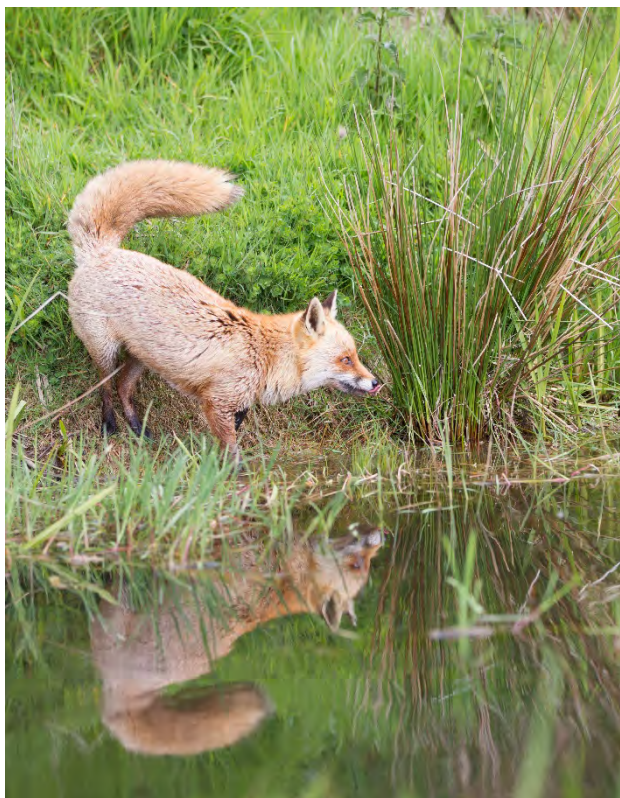
The other difficulty of course is what is wild ? When photographing wild animals in Africa I have been accused that this



isn't truly wild photography because the guides know where the animals are and we approach them in specialist vehicles. Furthermore is it indeed my photography if somebody else has found the animal for me. Taking this one stage further of course there are parks, particularly in South Africa, where the wildlife is introduced albeit into an area of thousands of square miles. There is also of course the question as to whether photographing from, for example an RSPB bird hide, is indeed wild photography or shooting birds visiting a feeding station in my garden is wild photography ? Also what about camera traps which remotely photograph animals ? The question, as with so much in life, I think is much more complex.

I think however that most people will accept that if an animal is living naturally in the wild then that's a wild animal if it's restrained in any way or is trained or specifically taken to an area for photography then that is a captive animal.

Now the question is does that matter? Well I believe it doesn't so long as the photographer is honest as to what he or she has done and how they captured the photograph. If I've produced a photograph of an animal which was taken in captivity but which produces a pleasing image which is well captured, well photographed and technically competent then I believe that constitutes a valid wildlife photograph as long as I'm honest and declare that it was indeed a captive animal. Taking this one stage further if I'm photographing on safari guided by an expert wildlife guide I don't think that's a problem so long as I admit to it. I think the question is why are we taking photographs, if they are to illustrate a book on wildlife then possibly they need to be wild images although I know that in the era of stock images many are not. If they are to document some study I've done on a wild animal then again they need to be truly wild images. If however there to produce a piece of artwork then, as long as I'm honest, it really does not matter whether they are wild or captive. When it comes to entering work in a competition then I believe that what a judge should be looking for is a well-executed photograph which captures not only the spirit of the animal and going back to the quote from Lisa how the photographer experienced the moment but is also highly pleasing to the eye.



Looking at the photo opposite of a fox stopping to drink from a stream at the centre I use in Devon where the wildlife is maintained in large enclosures well fed and whilst captive certainly not stressed. Is this is amazing piece of wildlife documentary photography? Well I guess in the truest sense it's not but it is a pleasing image well taken. Many people have taken photographs like this and indeed better on my workshops. I, and I hope all of them, have never however passed such a photograph of as being wild. I've never photographed a fox drinking from a stream in the wild but have photographed many other animals doing so.

I think there are far too many photographers out there who feel that the challenge of photographing a truly wild subject is what it's all about. That is important and indeed I've done that and enjoyed it many times and enjoyed and cherished the moment as much as the photographs I took afterwards.

The issue is I believe enjoying what you are doing and always seeking to improve our skills and craft and if this can only truly be achieved photographing wild animals. This is where I differ with many because, whilst I fervently believe that as a naturalist I need to study and understand the creature to photograph it and capture its behaviour, as a photographer I also need to apply

my skill to capture that memorable image that sums up the moment. Painters such as Edwin Landseer did just that and they combined both. If it was a wild animal excellent but if it was a captive one that produced a stunning image and help me develop my skill and furthermore I was honest about that then it really doesn't matter to me.

One thing that I am very clear about is that the image I reproduce has got to be as natural as possible i.e. the environment the animal in photographed in must be a natural environment, the animal must be behaving naturally, and nothing must be added or removed from the photograph using many of the myriads of tools we currently have available e.g. Photoshop or some other image editing software. I do believe that it is perfectly acceptable to crop an image and potentially to manage things like exposure et cetera but certainly not to add or remove things.

The PAGB, FIAP and RPS recently wrestled with this exact conundrum and eventually produced some very helpful guidance, I think that it's so important and helpful its worth reproducing it in full here.



Official and current Nature Photography Definition as agreed by PAGB, FIAP and RPS (2016)

Nature photography is restricted to the use of the photographic process to depict all branches of natural history, except anthropology and archaeology, in such a fashion that a well - informed person will be able to identify the subject material and certify its honest presentation. The story telling value of a photograph must be weighed more than the pictorial quality while maintaining high technical quality. Human elements shall not be present, except where those human elements are integral parts of the nature story such as nature subjects, like barn owls or storks, adapted to an environment modified by humans, or where those human elements are in situations depicting natural forces, like hurricanes or tidal waves.

Scientific bands, scientific tags or radio collars on wild animals are permissible. Photographs of human created hybrid plants, cultivated plants, feral animals, domestic animals, or mounted specimens are ineligible, as is any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement. No techniques that add, relocate, replace, or remove pictorial elements except by cropping are permitted. Techniques that enhance the presentation of the photograph without changing the nature story or the pictorial content, or without altering the content of the original scene, are permitted including HDR, focus stacking and dodging/burning. Techniques that remove elements added by the camera, such as dust spots, digital noise, and film scratches, are allowed. Stitched images are not permitted. All allowed adjustments must appear natural. Colour images can be converted to greyscale monochrome. Infrared images, either direct captures or derivations, are not allowed.

Images used in Nature Photography competitions may be divided in two classes: Nature and Wildlife.

Images entered in Nature sections meeting the Nature Photography Definition above can have landscapes, geologic formations, weather phenomena, and extant organisms as the primary subject matter. This includes images taken with the subjects in controlled conditions, such as zoos, game farms, botanical gardens, aquariums and any enclosure where the subjects are totally dependent on man for food.

Images entered in Wildlife sections meeting the Nature Photography Definition above are further defined as one or more extant zoological or botanical organisms free and unrestrained in a natural or adopted habitat. Landscapes, geologic formations, photographs of zoo or game farm animals, or of any extant zoological or botanical species taken under controlled conditions are not eligible in Wildlife sections. Wildlife is not limited to animals, birds and insects. Marine subjects and botanical subjects (including fungi and algae) taken in the wild are suitable wildlife subjects, as are carcasses of extant species. Wildlife images may be entered in Nature sections of Exhibitions.

The PAGB, FIAP and RPS guidance goes on to raise some other issues such as whether we should or should not introduce cultivated plants, what techniques are and are not allowed, e.g. focus staking, dodging and burning of images et cetera. Again my line is quite simple if we using particular camera techniques e.g. focus stacking or limited editing facilities e.g. dodging and burning then that really isn't a problem. Ansel Adams for example spent many hours producing his excellence nature shots in the darkroom using just such techniques and I've never seen him criticised. In summary I don't feel that there is an issue photographing captive animals so long as we don't adversely affect the image by adding, removing something or introducing the animal to somewhere it's not natural. Of paramount importance is that everybody, including anyone enjoying or judging us or our art, appreciates what we are seeking to portray, the skill we bought to bear and knows exactly how that image was captured. I would add one rider if entering in competitions you need to be very careful of the rules because I know one of the reasons that the PAGB et cetera issued those guidelines was simply that there are some who still persist in stating that non-wild caught images are inferior. There are of course some competitions that insist they must be truly wild were of course different rules apply.

I'm guessing this article may have only fuelled the debate but I hope I've also helped make you think. I have been shooting wildlife now for nearly 50 years and had the good fortune to work with excellent naturalists and photographers. I guess that I've had the "best of both worlds" in that I worked with wildlife in the wild and I've had opportunities to learn my craft working alongside professionals. Times are different now, we are looking for that very special image and modern equipment and techniques allow us to do just that. Restricting our opportunities to shoot wildlife solely to wild animals is not going to allow us to develop our technique fast enough nor the limited time many of us now have will it allow us to produce memorable wildlife images.

More reflections and musings of a wildlife photographer.

If you have found this interesting please visit <http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/pages/musings-of-a-wildlife-photographer.php> for more of my thoughts

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