



# Most common mistakes made by a wildlife photographer

I was asked a while ago what I thought were the most common mistakes a wildlife photographer could make. It set me thinking; what are the things I do, or see others do on my workshops that result in images that we are less than proud of. Here are my top 8, I'm not sure if they'll help you but hope they do. If you can think of any that you might like to add to the list please do email me at [bob@naresphotos.co.uk](mailto:bob@naresphotos.co.uk) and I willingly post them with this article on my website so others can benefit too.

Many of the errors that we all too often make revolve around the camera settings, too slower shutter speed, an inappropriate aperture, the wrong ISO, incorrect white balance or the wrong focusing mode. I will try to look at these little more in this article but before I do maybe it's worth my repeating a mantra a famous wildlife photographer used to repeat all too often to me. He would regularly put his hand over my camera and ask me what the settings were. When I couldn't tell him he used to repeat a phrase I had heard him say so often that it became a little tedious

“Left over settings give left over photos.”

I was shooting film, colour transparencies, at the time so errors in settings did leave you with photographs you couldn't use and importantly they also cost you money. One of the benefits of digital photography of course is that you can shoot as many images as you like and they're all free. This doesn't change however the message behind his mantra. If you don't know and haven't thought about the settings on your camera, when you're called upon to shoot something in a hurry they may not be at their optimum.



Wildlife all too often presents us with situations where there is but a fleeting opportunity to capture the image and if you're having to fiddle with your camera then you will certainly miss it. If you are in a strange or exciting environment such as the safaris I run in Africa the exhilaration and adrenaline can take over and anything you would normally think of goes “out of the window”. Now I'm not naive enough to think that I can anticipate everything ahead of the time but there are many things you certainly can. For example you can choose the optimum ISO for the conditions, you can choose the white balance that is

appropriate, you can have the focus mode on an appropriate setting. You can set the aperture or shutter speed on your camera in a range which is pretty close to what is likely to be required given the conditions. What my friend was really doing when he covered my camera was checking that I'd actually thought about the conditions and thought about the best and most suitable settings on my camera. When an opportunity presented itself they may not be optimum but they would be near enough and any slight mistake on my part is less likely to have disastrous results. Furthermore if I knew what they were beforehand I could more quickly and easily change them.

Whilst the technology in modern cameras brings enormous benefits it also has a downside. When I started shooting on film there was very little you could adjust on the camera and perhaps therefore less to think about. I say perhaps because I still feel that most of the creation of a photo happens in our heads and the technology simply helps us to get there faster. It is true though that modern digital cameras are much more complex and offer a far wider range of options. These, if used correctly, can help us enormously but if not understood or thought through can equally result in unnecessarily poor images. All the time manufacturers are making more advances designed to help us. As an example the new range of cameras from Canon have very sophisticated focusing systems which, if used correctly, can make a significant difference to your success rate, with fast moving subjects.

Changing all the camera settings when a situation presents itself would simply take too long however selecting beforehand a set that will best work given the prevailing conditions, of weather, likely subject, lens on your camera, whether you have support e.g. a tripod and time of day will mean you have to make fewer changes and any you omit are less likely to be serious. This is the habit we need to get into if we are not to produce “left over photos”

## Errors in camera settings that frequently cause problems.

- 1 **The choice of aperture.** Your choice of aperture when shooting clearly affects the depth of field as well as the amount of light entering through the lens. There is a temptation to open your lens as wide as you can to allow in as much light as possible. In addition wide apertures produce the wonderful soft out of focus background or Bokeh that is so pleasant on the eye and currently very fashionable.



I run workshops at a crocodile centre where this is an error I often see people make. Crocodiles have very long heads and the light levels in the centre I use are relatively low. It is therefore tempting open the lens as far as you can to

- a) reduce the detail in the background and
- b) allow as much light as possible through to the sensor.

However I often find that when people review their images they are upset because part of the head is out of focus.

Shooting on a full frame camera with a 300 mm lens at about 5 m away, the sort of distance we might use at the crocodile centre, will result in a depth of field of just 6.27 cm. A crocodile's head is much longer than that so it's no wonder that, if it's facing you, even if the eyes are in focus the nostrils are not. This can produce an interesting shot, as above, but only if that's what you want! Whilst crocodiles might be extreme examples of this problem there are many other occasions where it equally as relevant.

The solution is to think about the subjects you're likely to photograph, the distance you are likely to be from them, the lens you are using and to choose an aperture that is appropriate. Choosing the right aperture is a matter of practice and experience but you can improve this by either looking at the set of tables available on my website at <http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/pages/tips-and-techniques.php#DOFCalculator> or using an increasing number of apps written for smart phones. A popular one of mine for an iPhone is SimpleDOF available from the Apple Store for just 79p. Given that aperture and the resulting depth of field is likely to be the most important aspect of my photograph I tend always to shoot in Aperture Priority mode where I select the aperture and leave the camera to select a shutter speed. That doesn't mean I don't check the shutter speed the camera selects in the viewfinder (see below) and maybe compromise on the aperture or adjust the ISO but at least I'm in the best starting position.

- 2 **Shooting at an appropriate shutter speed.** I don't suggest necessarily shooting in Shutter Priority mode where you choose the shutter speed because as I previously said I predominantly shoot in Aperture Priority mode because depth of field is key to me. What is important however is to carefully decide on the speed you select, if shooting in Shutter Priority mode, or to quickly check the speed the camera selects if shooting in another mode. It only takes a fraction of a second glance in the viewfinder at the selected setting (see opposite) and check it before fully depressing the shutter to take the shot. Failing to do so can make a massive difference and result in blurred shots if it is too slow. You would hopefully never make a manoeuvre in your car without first checking the rear view mirror, it's the same in photography never shoot before you glanced at the settings in the viewfinder.



All too frequently on my workshops I find people saying that something in the image is blurred and thus they begin to doubt their own skill in focusing. When I look at the image and check the settings that were used I often find that in reality the shutter speed is too low. Is not just whether the subject is moving that we need to consider but also whether we can hold the lens still enough. As with aperture, selecting an appropriate speed for a moving subject is something that comes with practice but selecting the appropriate speed for the size of lens you use is a little bit simpler. There is a simple rule of thumb which works very well and states that you should never shoot with a shutter speed at less than one over the focal length of the lens. For example if using a 400 mm lens you should never shoot with a shutter speed of less than 1/400<sup>th</sup> of a second. It is worth remembering though that this is a rule of thumb and thus is only a guide - not a hard and fast rule. If holding the camera carefully many of us can manage better than this but it's a great place to start. It's also worth remembering that the image stabilisation or vibration reduction systems on cameras can help this and even the most basic can decrease shutter speed you can hold the lens steady at by at least half. For example with a 400 mm lens to 1/200<sup>th</sup> of a second. It's worth noting however that if the subject is fast moving you need shutter speed appropriate for that. The wildebeest in the photograph opposite was moving very fast to escape the crocodile and whilst shot on a 300 mm lens it required a shutter speed of 1/2500<sup>th</sup> of a second to freeze the action.



My golden rule is never be afraid of shooting at the highest shutter speed you possibly can. If you can't get to an appropriate speed be prepared to raise the ISO as high as you dare. This will sometimes result in noisy images but a noisy image that is sharp is far preferable to a noiseless image which is blurred. Further if you have taken the shot at a high speed and high ISO and the opportunity still presents itself you can turn the ISO down and take another shot albeit at a lower speed. That way you have the opportunity of shooting an image which is less noisy and might just still be sharp.

- 3 **Shooting at the wrong ISO.** Shooting at very high ISO settings is becoming increasingly possible with modern cameras. On the Canon 1DX or 7DMk2 it is perfectly possible, with care, to shoot clean noiseless images at 6400 ISO and possibly even at 12800. You may need to think carefully about how you control your image for example managing things so that you clearly “shoot to the right” and think carefully about your other settings but it is perfectly possible. For those not aware of the technique of “shooting or exposing to the right” there are plenty of articles which explain it clearly on the web and I will be writing and posting one on my website very soon. An excellent article can however be found in a podcast from Martin Bailey at <http://www.martinbaileyphotography.com/2013/07/29/why-expose-to-the-right-podcast-381/>.

My advice to everybody on my workshops is to select an ISO appropriate to the conditions and to stick with it until such time as you need to amend it to allow for example for a faster shutter speed. There is a temptation, and I see it all too often, for people to keep changing the ISO whilst they shooting which in my experience results in an increased level of confusion and more “leftover photos”. In the days of film we had to choose the ISO or ASA of the film we put in our camera to suit the conditions and stick with it until we've exhausted the film. While that was usually only 36 frames it was a good discipline to get into and one I think it's worth returning to in the digital era.



Another piece of advice I give when talking to camera clubs on managing camera settings is to learn what you can “get away with” in your camera with respect ISO. It needs to be remembered that you can shoot light objects at higher ISO settings than dark objects. I therefore suggest when you have some time to spare you photograph a light object and a dark object for example a white cat and a black cat at every ISO setting your camera is capable of. If you then review the images and make a note of when the levels of noise were very low or acceptably low for white objects and when they



were for black objects you'll be in a much better position to understand how your camera will perform in the field.

- 4 **Selecting the wrong autofocus settings.** Modern digital cameras have increasingly complex autofocus mechanisms. The first autofocus cameras and lenses simply had a single point in the centre of the camera viewfinder and motors on the lenses which worked very slowly. In fact the first time I saw an autofocus camera and lens I said to the person demonstrating it I don't believe it'll ever work properly. The truth is of course somewhat different and we now heavily rely on autofocus but I would still go so far as to say I don't think it works adequately and to that end we need to understand its foibles so that we can take best advantage of what it offers. Some of the latest offerings particularly from Canon and increasingly from other manufacturers are becoming very sophisticated and spending some time looking at and understanding how they work will result in far more images correctly focused. Each camera manufacturer has however adopted a different approach to solving this same problem and thus there is no common advice I can give here other than to understand what your camera is capable of and to select the appropriate mode very carefully. Getting it right whatever your camera will however result in fewer wasted shots.

### Other "errors" which result in wasted images.

It is not just the basic camera settings that can cause problems resulting in "left over photos" there are many other mistakes that are equally all too often made. The following are just a few that I've noticed people on my workshops making.

- 5 **Not reviewing your photos in the field.** "Chimping" or reviewing the images on the back of the camera is something that is frowned upon by certain groups of photographers. In fact I once heard somebody say that "a good photographer should know what he has shot without having to look at the back of the camera, chimping is for beginners who are not confident with their photography". I've heard some very arrogant things said in my time but this has to enter the list somewhere near the top. I started shooting on film and would have given a great deal for the opportunity to check my images after I shot them rather than wait a week for the processing laboratory to return them to me. I so strongly feel that reviewing the images on the back of the camera is so key to the success of any photographer that I wrote an article in the "musings" section of my website covering just that. You can locate it and read it at <http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/media/PDF%20Files/Musings/Rinse%20and%20Repeat.pdf>



- 6 **Having sufficient patience.** Our modern day life all too often happens at speed, we are not used to slowing down and waiting. We get impatient with the drinks vending machine if our drink isn't produced fast enough, we get impatient if the train is a few minutes late, we demand faster and faster broadband so that our webpages load quicker or we can download our favourite songs and upload our photos faster.

My grandfather used to be a gamekeeper and when he took me out for a walk he used to make me stop in the corner of the field and wouldn't allow me to go any further until I had told him what I could hear, smell and feel. He wanted me to become part of my surroundings and to slow down. I used to cycle to his house as fast as I could and what he actually wanted me to do was to stop, take in the surroundings and become part of it. He wanted me to slow down. We all too often don't allow enough time for our wildlife photography, be that waiting in a hide, sitting quietly in a woodland waiting for something to happen or simply walking slowly observing our surroundings. We all watch the wonderful BBC wildlife programmes and say goodness that photographer must have had phenomenal patience and then get upset when we go out ourselves and can't produce great images in the 5 or 10 minutes we allocate to the task. There is no simple answer, there are many demands on our time and we all have two shorter windows to work in but my advice is always to find ways to first slow your pace of operation and second to allocate an appropriate amount of time to your photography.

7 **Be aware of what is happening around you.** Many of my best photographs have been taken whilst I was trying to photograph something else. It's all too easy to concentrate hard on whatever it is we are looking at and to totally miss things that are around us. Looking through the viewfinder of your camera only exacerbates this. We use the phrase "tunnel vision" and nothing could be more appropriate when looking down the narrow viewfinder of your lens. My advice is to stop every so often lift your head away from your camera look around you open both eyes wide and see what there is to see. Often you'll find something that you didn't expect and can swing your camera around and take a great picture.



8 **Choosing the right lens.** I'm all too often asked "how long lens to I need for wildlife photography"? Long lenses are increasingly becoming affordable and readily available but they are however not always desirable. I was out with somebody recently who kept shooting images they were unhappy with and was struggling to understand why. When I suggested that they zoomed their lens back and took a wider view they were very sceptical but when they eventually tried it they were surprised at the result. Equally I recall working with a photographer on one of my dragonfly workshops who just found a bright red mail ruddy darter. He wanted to get as close to it as possible and to fill the frame with it so spent a great deal of effort chasing it around the undergrowth. I stopped him and persuaded him to shoot a bit wider when the dragonfly was positioned amongst some soft green reeds. The resulting image had the dragonfly filling about a fifth of the frame and the slightly out of focus green reeds filling the bulk. The dragonfly was so attractive and so brightly coloured that whilst it didn't fill the frame by carefully composition it created a very pleasing image. That photographer has been on many more of my workshops since and often tells me how he now takes two sets of images one at the longest length of his lens and the other at a much shorter length. Sometime ago I was out with a professional portrait photographer who I'd asked him to take some shots of me which I could use for publicity material. I had the longest lens I could possibly find because I thought it was appropriate for a wildlife photographer, he had a short lens which best suited his professional role. We both found a Robin and both photographed it. When we looked at each other images his were much more pleasing than mine because he had plenty of the background in them. I was so taken by the experience that I wrote an article entitled "what Robin taught me about my choice of lens" you can read the article on my website here [http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/media/PDF%20Files/Musings/What a robin taught me about choice of lens.pdf](http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/media/PDF%20Files/Musings/What%20a%20robin%20taught%20me%20about%20choice%20of%20lens.pdf)

I wrote an article in a previous newsletter entitled "Being prepared as a wildlife photographer" and would recommend reading this alongside the above. It can be found at:

[http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/media/PDF%20Files/Musings/Being prepared as a wildlife photographer.pdf](http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/media/PDF%20Files/Musings/Being%20prepared%20as%20a%20wildlife%20photographer.pdf)

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## 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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If you are a member of camera club and would like me to come and share more of my thoughts on what it takes to be a successful wildlife photographer ask your programme secretary to visit my website [here](#) and look at the talks I provide together with the feedback from clubs where I have been in the past.

*Bob Brind-Surch*