



**Bob
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Natures
Photos

“To Photoshop or not to Photoshop” that is the question

In a recent newsletter I included an article on how I select my “keepers”. To read it click [here](#). I have had a great deal of positive feedback from this article but also been asked again and again a question I am often asked at Camera Clubs when I give a talk – “to Photoshop or not to Photoshop”.

This is a very difficult and some would say controversial topic which I believe is unfortunately often treated far too lightly. Photo retouching has been around since the dawn of photography and image retouching has been around for much longer. It does need to be treated seriously however it needn't become the tool we all rush for all the time.

I once came across the following quote by a wildlife photographer called Lisa Langell:

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

For me this is why I photograph wildlife, I want to share my experiences of the natural world with others. Those of you who know me well will be aware that I claim to be first and foremost *“a naturalist who photographs what he observes rather than a photographer specialising in wildlife.”* This is very important to me and goes back to why I started taking photos in the late 60s. For me back then photography was a simple means of producing images, in my case transparencies, to illustrate talks I gave on Natural History. As such they had to be technically accurate. Even though there was then little capacity to post process images, I was very much of the view that - *what I saw was what I took*. Over the years however my photography has progressed to an all absorbing pastime; a pastime where developing and perfecting my art and techniques have become as important to me as the subject matter itself. I am still however clear about one thing - *I photograph nature as I see it* - but that's not to say I can't produce art at the same time.

I firmly believe that photography is an art form and is our way of expressing ourselves. I recently wrote a talk for camera clubs called “Beyond auto – taking Creative Control of your camera.” (Details [here](#)). In this talk I take people through the basic creative controls on their cameras and discuss how the inbuilt computer in a modern DSLR camera, rather than taking over your camera in *Auto Mode*, can support and assist you in being more creative. I also give another talk entitled “My digital workflow” where rather than discussing the conventional notion of workflow as a set of processes in Photoshop I discuss my workflow from immediately after I press the shutter button. How I capture images, how I preserve or back them up, how I sort them and just a little bit of post processing. That's to say my personal workflow as a wildlife photographer.

During and after both of these talks I am often asked for my views on Photoshop. I always preface my answer with *“as a wildlife photographer I don't believe in too much editing of images”* but that there is certainly a place



for these techniques in other genera's of photography. This is of course far too simplistic an answer and one that does need much more development and exploration.

I believe that we are first and foremost artists producing something to engage and share a moment with the viewer and in my case to engage and share a moment in the natural world. There may be times when an image needs some work after or even before the picture is taken and as long as this doesn't create a lie i.e. produce a picture that you pass off as something else then I don't think this is a problem. The photo left seems to show a kestrel on a wall with a dead mouse. The real image

was of a tame kestrel with it's jesses showing (see inset). Is it a problem that I removed these in Photoshop? No, as long as I am prepared to tell you and don't claim something different and produce a lie.



We often “stage” photos by removing dead leaves or litter before taking them or choosing our angles carefully. Removing the litter afterwards in Photoshop is only a version of this and isn't in my view a problem. I have done it and even used Photoshop to remove signposts in photos such as the one of a fallow deer fawn taken in the New Forest (left).

In 1928 the Hungarian photographer André Kertész took a photograph of an alley in the French suburb of Meudon. The photo had a large bridge in the background and he wasn't satisfied at all with it. He later returned and took another one. This one had people in the foreground and a train passing on the bridge. The second picture became a masterpiece. Just because he came back, and changed his first picture because his vision hadn't been right first time. In other words, he did a manual retouch of the surroundings, but kept the view. Was this wrong?

68 years earlier, one of the first bodily retouches was made by a photographer of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln didn't like his body on the first portrait so he ordered to have his head placed on another body. The retouched portrait later became the picture that was printed on the five dollar bills.

Just like removing the sign post in front to that fallow deer fawn I can't see anything wrong with any of these. However when it comes to wildlife photography removing something that significantly changes the image or adding something that wasn't there and passing it off as a natural photograph certainly is wrong. A famous Swedish wildlife photographer - Terje Helleso – was named Nature Photographer of the Year by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency in 2010. A year later, in 2011, he caused a scandal when it was discovered that he published a number of images in which stock photographs of hard-to-find animals were *Photoshopped* into natural scenes. Needless to say his career and all the great work he had produced before was tarnished. Was this really worth it for his art – emphatically no. Did this advance wildlife photography? Equally emphatically, no.



There is a place for a scientific photo of an animal, absolutely, but there is also a place for sharing a moment of wonder. As Lisa Langell puts it “*its capturing how you experienced the moment*”. The leopardess in the picture – left – is called Fundi which is Swahili for mechanic. She is so called because her mother gave birth to her under an abandoned earth mover in the Serengeti and she went on to raise her own cub in the same way. She has understandably become very accustomed to safari vehicles and on the occasion when I took this photo she simply walked towards us down the track giving me the fantastic opportunity to capture a truly wild and beautiful leopard and to share that moment with others. Those of you who are very astute will notice a butterfly towards

the left of the photo. I am often told that it would be better if I had “Photoshopped” this out. Maybe, but should I also have Photoshopped out the blade of grass across her right rear leg? True I didn't just take one photo but 6 and this is the best one. True I did ‘*engineer*’ the photo by choosing a shallow depth of field and setting a high shutter speed. I also chose a white balance that would best show the dry grass of the African Savanah. In other words I set up the picture to show how I experienced the moment, other than that the shot is straight out of the camera. True I used my skill to adjust what the camera captured but I haven't created something that is false and I haven't produced something that I am ashamed of. Equally I wouldn't have been ashamed nor would see it as a problem if I had removed the butterfly or the blade of grass – I just chose not to in this instance.

I don't subscribe to the view that a photograph has to be made completely in the camera not afterwards and that retouching is absolutely bad. Retouching that improves the art and the viewer's experience is a good thing and has been practised since the dawn of time let alone the dawn of photography. Ansell Adams practised it in the darkroom and I believe would have welcomed and embraced the wonderful tools we have available nowadays.

What has changed are the tools and their ease of use, to "Photoshop" a picture is to go back to the roots of art and our human urge to enhance and beautify an image. Retouching is definitely a part of photography, ancient and modern. Altering images has been around ever since man sought to portray the world around him on his cave walls. Since very beginnings of photography retouching has been used to achieve the image the photographer intended when he or she pressed the shutter button and for nature photography "*to capture how I experienced the moment*". The only things that have changed or are different are the tools available and the ease with which we can use them.

What then is my line on using Photoshop to alter an image well it's simple, if it alters the picture and is used to deceive the viewer and support a lie then I am not prepared to do it. It is not something I do simply because I didn't get it right in the camera, because I didn't take the care to exercise carefully that part of your art. If however it improves my art and helps me to portray '*how I experienced the moment*' and importantly if I am prepared to tell people what I have done then that is perfectly Ok. The acid test is this; has the picture improved my reputation not tarnished it. I like to think that my skills as a wildlife photographer are exactly that and are practised in the field not in the office and that this shows through in my images. It really is much easier to learn to master the controls available in your camera to produce an image than to sit for hours in front of a computer adjusting it afterwards. I know which I prefer although I am not averse to using the wonderful tools available through modern computer software when they make a really valuable contribution and add something but don't deceive. My goal is simple to produce art through my photography that I am proud of.

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

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.

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