



Top tips for successful wildlife photography

I am often asked for my top ten tips as a wildlife photographer and always mumble my way through a reply but recently when sitting on a bench with a workshop participant his question set me thinking harder.

Those of you who have heard my camera club talk entitled “The Art of Wildlife Photography”, more details [here](#), will know that I often quote some sage advice I was given 40 years ago by the late H.G. Hurrell. H.G., as he was known, was a Devon naturalist who, with Sir Peter Scott, produced some of the early Look programmes on the BBC. He was a highly competent photographer and pioneering early natural history film maker who did so very much to advance the public’s knowledge and awareness of natural history through articles in magazines, talks and books as well as TV appearances. He counselled me that if I wanted to be successful as a wildlife photographer I had to first be a naturalist. A naturalist, who has his eyes and mind open, is prepared to observe everything and above all ask questions. Only when I started to understand the natural world could I possibly photograph it. First hand observations were central to H.G’s approach and one that has served me well ever since. The Maasai guides I work with in Kenya practise this approach and anyone who has been on one of my trips will surely agree that it works.



With such wonderful wildlife programmes on the television these days and so much excellent wildlife photography all around us learning about the natural world could not be easier. However when I started to formulate an answer to the question asked by my workshop participant it was the other advice H.G. gave me that started me thinking. He told me to always remember the 5P’s of Passion, Patience, Practice, Preparation and Purpose. I quote it at the start of my “Art of Wildlife Photography” talk, as it is as valid today as when H.G. told me it all those years ago.

Passion – is critical in all that we do especially photography because unless we are passionate and prepared to learn all there is to know about a subject we won’t take decent photos. Photography is about sharing our passions with the world through our photographs, and wildlife photography provides the perfect opportunity to capture pictures that say “WOW,” and pass that sentiment on to other people. In my photos I always try to share what it was that caught my attention in the first place. My best photos are when I have shot with ‘emotion’ and tried to highlight my feeling in the image. Lisa Langell the Arizona based Wildlife and Fine Art photographer says on her website



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

Patience - I guess everyone would tell you that patience is key to wildlife photography and of course I have to agree. To me however it’s not the patience to wait for an animal to appear but the patience to capture exactly the picture I envision in my mind. To me the most interesting wildlife photos are the ones where the animals exhibit some kind of behaviour unique to their species. To capture that takes time and real patience but is highly rewarding when it happens. One of my best photos of a red deer stag took me 30 years to capture. I knew exactly the photo I wanted so when it presented itself to me I was able to take it.



Practice – Cartier-Bresson said “Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst.” With the advent of digital photography I have seen some who approach this in a week on safari in Africa! What Cartier-Bresson meant however was that it is practice and reflection that perfects any art form. Malcolm Gladwell in his book Outliers made popular the notion that it

takes 10,000 hours of dedicated practice in your particular field to bring out the best in you. His comments were based on a theory by psychologist Anders Ericsson in his study of violinists at Berlins Academy of music. This was, in his view, how long it took you to become a top classical musician. Maybe we don't aspire to reach that height in our photography but it is still practice that will improve your skill levels. Spend time at home honing and practising your skills so that when out in the field you and your camera become one and you are not constantly checking camera settings. When you learnt to drive you thought hard about the gear you selected, your position in the road etc., now it is hopefully more instinct and it is that which makes for a good driver.

Preparation - Alexander Graham Bell is quoted as saying "Before everything else preparation is the key to success". For me as a wildlife photographer preparation is absolutely key. As well as your photography skills I would encourage you to study your quarry and get to know it well. Become the naturalist H.G. Hurrell encouraged me to be. When you have done this you will be able to predict how your wildlife quarry behaves, know its habits and take much better photographs. It's all so much easier these days and I would encourage you to read wildlife as well as photography books, listen to interviews with wildlife experts, watch TV programmes, consult the internet and above all ask others. Remember in all aspects of life surround yourself with those who are better than you and their skills will rub off on you. In pure photography terms always remember to prepare your camera before you go out to shot. Check memory cards, battery but most of all that the settings are appropriate for the conditions. Those who have been on my workshops will remember my saying "left over settings produce left over pictures".

Purpose – Whatever you do in life do it with a clear purpose. By all means go out with your camera and photograph whatever comes your way, luck does play a key part in wildlife photography, but if you really want to produce that stunning photograph don't just trust to luck but prepare beforehand and go out with a clear purpose. Decide what you want to photograph, make sure you have the patience to get the photo you have envisioned in your head, that you have done the practice and the preparation but most of all that you have the passion to capture the moment and produce a better picture tomorrow than the one you produced yesterday.

Above all remember the first of these P's. It is Passion for your subject that produces the best photographs.

"We don't make a photograph just with a camera, we bring to the act of photography all the books we have read, the movies we have seen, the music we have heard, the people we have loved."

Ansel Adams.

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.

Bob Brind-Surch