



What a robin taught me about my choice of lens



There is one question I receive more than any other either from people at camera club talks or booking on one of my workshops or tours. “How long a lens do I need for wildlife photography?”

I have thought about this often either as I write a response to a fellow photographer or as I ponder which lens I should take with me on a trip. We all too often read statements such as “you can never have enough focal length for photographing wildlife”. The more I think about it however the more I wonder if these statements are written by those with an interest in selling lenses. I guess we have all told ourselves if only I had that better lens or better camera then

I would produce better pictures. We often forget the other old saying it’s not the kit but the technique that matters. It’s not the camera but the person behind it that takes or misses the photo!

Back in the early 1980’s I told myself if I had a Canon A1 I would be a much better wildlife photographer. I saved for and bought an A1. I cherished and was very proud of it but did it make me a better photographer? I guess the answer is obvious but just to register it here – NO! That’s not to say better lenses and better cameras don’t do a better job, they do, but they are no substitute for solid practice to hone and develop your skills. It’s so much easier to practice now than when I started out as shooting is free as you don’t have to buy film.

Returning to the subject of lenses and the best focal length. I was out with a friend of mine a few weeks ago both of us trying to photograph robins in the snow. I had my 600mm lens on its sturdy tripod with full gimbal head. He had a much more nimble 70-200mm. Who got the best shots? Well it certainly wasn’t me. I had such an unwieldy setup that was so difficult to manoeuvre I missed many of the good shots. I simply wasn’t in the right place at the right time. Yes when I did get a shot it was a frame filling close up showing a brilliant bird with an equally brilliant redbreast perched on a snowy branch but did it convey the scene? Did it show the brilliance my eyes enjoyed of a bright little bird in a majestic white winter wonderland, certainly not.

I started to think about this and tried to compare what I was experiencing to what I was capturing with my camera and it made me think of how my wife describes a good novel. In a novel, regardless of how well defined the characters are and how compelling the plot may be, without sufficient emphasis on the setting, the story lacks context and certainly won’t become a best seller. In the same way, I began to realize that overly tight shots, while they may look nice in an illustrated field guide, lack context, and they are not the kind of shots on which my eyes will linger and I will return to often. They are not the shots that other people will remember. If you look at popular wildlife photo websites regularly you will begin to feel you are looking at the same photos over and over again. Regardless of the subject, they all start to look the same, they are all taken by wildlife photographers hooked on continually using their longest lenses. If however you visit the web sites of successful wildlife photographers whose photographs sell for many hundreds or thousands of pounds, you often won’t see those same tight shots that fail to create or sustain visual appeal. If you look at the work of great wildlife artists like Thorburn, Lodge and others you will often find their best work shows the bird or animal in its natural surroundings sharing it with other



wildlife or exquisite vegetation. They tell you a story about that animal and often depict behaviour or show the animal interacting with their environment. I am very fond of a painting by Lodge showing a flock of goldfinches racing down a frozen hedge line pursued by a sparrow hawk. I have close up shots of goldfinches and of sparrow hawks but this painting is the one I would want to hang on my wall. The photos I personally would buy and enjoy are much more likely to be shots that incorporate and also feature the background and environment as well as the bird or animal that is the apparent subject of the photo.



As I thought about this little robin and my own photography I began to reflect on that phrase “you can never have a long enough lens”. This session with a cheery robin showed me this is far from being true.

It is an unfortunate aspect of human nature that we seem to want more than we have. If my two sons are anything to go by then this attitude is getting more common. Many of us feel that the amount of money that would make us happy is a little more than we presently have, the car or house that would make us happy is one that is a little nicer than the one that they currently own, etc. Wildlife photographers often believe that the lens that would make them happy

would be the one that is just a bit longer than the one that they currently own. I have watched many migrate to longer and longer lenses, myself included, and the result all too often has a negative effect on the quality of our photography. When people spend a large amount of money on a lens they tend to fall in love with tightly cropped close-up shots but this is only part of the story. There is a place for such shots and I am often really impressed by the amazing level of detail they display but often once I get past being impressed by the detail I find myself quickly losing interest. The limited angle of view, in most cases, fails to engage me and draw me in to the moment the photographer was enjoying when he or she took the photo. The simple test for me is do I want to keep returning again and again to look at the photo, if I do then it has worked. Those who have attended my talks on the “Art of Wildlife Photography” will have heard me quote a photographer called Lisa Langell a successful wildlife and nature photographer living in Arizona.

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

To me, as a wildlife photographer and naturalist, the joy of photography is seeing and capturing a stunning image and then sharing that moment and all it entails with others.



One of my favourite photographs is a simple shot taken in Tanzania of a leopard walking down a path. It is a tight shot yes but it takes me to a place and a time and I hope it does the same for you. The pleasure for me comes in taking the viewer on a journey to that same place and though the photo enabling them to share that moment in time. This can sometime be achieved, as in this case, with a long lens but all too often is better managed with a much shorter lens. The skill is capturing the magic of the moment and creating a visual interest and it’s these things that for me are the qualities of the shot.

When I first had a 500mm and then a 600mm lens I found myself using it more and more often even adding a 1.4X or even a 2X converter to extend it even further. I, like most others, fell in love with the detail that these superb lenses were able to capture in the ultra-tight shots that I was taking. I do recognize that there are specific situations where using the longest focal length available can be a true advantage. If I am trying to photograph an eagle’s nest or a kingfisher and want to be certain I am not disturbing the birds by being too close, I will use the longest focal length available to me. If I am photographing small birds even from a short distance, I might still want to use a longer focal length because of the small size of the subjects. However even in these situations, I think I might get more interesting shots by shooting wider than I would have shot a few years ago.

I fully realise that different approaches suit different mediums and are better for conveying different messages. When posting photos on the web and on public forums those taken with a wider angle of view just don't show nearly as well on the screen as they would in a larger print. Many of my favourite wider angle shots simply don't work on a screen - or indeed in a newsletter like this. Tighter shots that were often taken with less creativity often do better in this medium. May I dare to suggest that whilst posting pictures on an internet forum is a good way to elicit feedback and learn about photography; doing so may also restrict your growth as a photographer.

In summary after that simple session with the robin I am starting to feel that what I am doing is taking the same shots over and over again. Regardless of the subject they are all beginning to look the same to me and they also seem to be the same shots that I see others taking and posting on internet forums hundreds of times each day. My growth as a photographer has perhaps reached a point of stagnation, and I am starting to come to the conclusion that, to improve the quality of my photos, I need to evaluate what I am doing and to experiment with some different approaches to taking my photos. I won't abandon the long lens or the tight shot but will also try to capture those photos that tell a real story and will draw people back to look at them over and over again. In this world where everyone has a camera, if only in their phone, and everyone can take photos which surround us every day in magazines, on bill boards and on the TV I need to revisit the magic I saw in that painting by Lodge and try to recreate that in my photographs.

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