



With a camera like that you are bound to take excellent photos

I was recently reflecting on an attempt I made some years ago to photograph nesting great crested grebes. I was sitting by a local lake looking across at a nest on a small promontory amongst some reeds. I had a 600mm f4 lens on my camera and the whole thing on a rigid tripod with a suitable gimbal head. I chose my position carefully as I wanted to be on the same level as the nest and without actually getting into the water this would be difficult closer up. The vantage point some distance away allowed me to see into the reeds and gave the illusion of being lower down. The bank I was sitting on was beside a route used by anglers and thus I attracted the occasional comment from passing fishermen. It wasn't long before someone said "with a camera like that you must take excellent photos". I nodded and smiled agreement but when sometime later after the third passer-by said the same thing I felt I had to reply. He had a trolley with all his fishing gear on board and I simply replied "Well yes and with equipment like that you must catch great fish". He was somewhat taken aback and began to tell me how he had just taken up fishing and that this was his uncle's kit. He was planning to set up his kit very near where I was sitting and his uncle was going to join him later in the day. 'This kit is great' he said 'but it is my uncle's skill that is needed to get the best fish'. I replied that it was exactly the same with my camera, it was a great piece of kit and a great lens but just pointing it in the right direction and pressing the button wasn't all that was required. I told him how I had chosen the location carefully, studied the direction of the light using a piece of software called "photographers ephemeris" (look it up it is brilliant), scouted out the nest to see when the birds had laid eggs and thought hard about the camera settings to obtain the shot. He started to set up his fishing rods and other equipment and engaged me in conversation. He took out his iPhone to show me a picture he had taken of a kingfisher with a small "point and shoot" camera and asked my advice regarding how he could improve it. It was a great picture and I told him so. It had clearly been taken by someone who had sat very still and keenly observed the bird. As a fisherman, he was a keen observer of nature and had spent considerable time and effort taking a photo of which he was justifiably proud. He told me that this picture had appeared in his local angling newsletter and he had it printed and framed to hang on his wall at home. I complimented him on his work and explained how it was his dedicated observation as well as the time he had put in that had produced such a great shot. Great kit, like his uncle's rods, would help but having all that without the knowledge and patience he wouldn't have taken as good a photo.

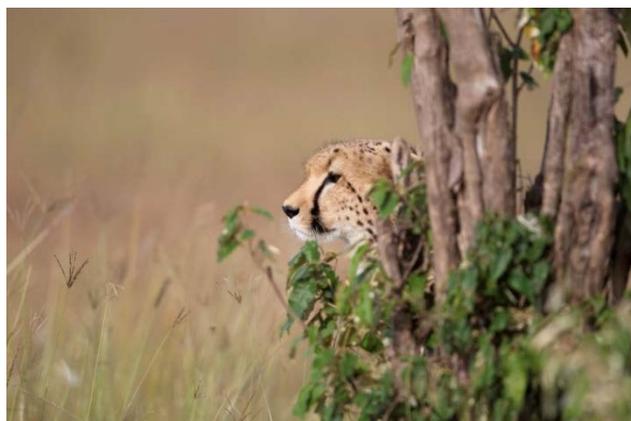


I have just visited the annual Photography Show and I suspect like many others I lusted after the latest and best camera. I was reminded of how, many years ago on seeing a Canon A1 camera (those under a certain age will not know it!) I told myself if I had that camera I would take better photos. I saved up and bought one. Did my photography improve by an amount proportional to the cost of the camera? I will leave you to guess the answer! That's not to say good cameras don't produce better results. Indeed we are currently seeing some excellent pieces of equipment becoming available for the enthusiastic photographer but there is no replacement for good old

fashioned experience and with wildlife photography a great deal of effort, knowledge of your quarry and your equipment and just a little luck.

Sometimes on hearing someone say you take a good photo I reply, using my own variant of Ansel Adams great quote; 'I don't snap or shoot or take photos I make them'. 'Taking photos presumes that they are out there for *taking* and reduces their value – making them means I have to have a part, an investment in them'. That investment maybe in terms of time learning to use the equipment, money to buy it or just old fashioned time to observe and learn about your subject. I make photos to share a moment and a love of wildlife, to me they are my way of sharing something I have experienced and present it to be enjoyed by others. They are my own form of self-expression and art. I used to take photos to illustrate talks or publications on natural history but now I like to think I am an artist using photography as a medium to share something I really enjoy.

Cameras are improving with every new model and iteration as are lenses and the other associated paraphernalia of the digital world. Yes I can justify the need to get a new bit of kit that does a little more than its predecessor but how much of that is me being convinced by the marketing efforts of manufacturers keen to sell kit. A new model of camera or lens that promises to get a picture which is sharper, has lower noise, wider dynamic range and solves all the other flaws we can so blame on our current kit. However these technical solutions presented to us by manufacturers ought not to be our only targets as we strive for better photographs. Instead if we were to use our cameras better then we don't always need better cameras. However I don't



necessarily mean just using them better by learning new technical skills and photographic techniques but rather learning how to use them to express ourselves; to produce your own art. It is certainly necessary as photographers for us to learn about our cameras and the settings to use to take a photograph, just as a good writer has to learn how to use a pencil or a word processor and all the technical rules of grammar. However it's only when the writer or photographer puts competence and technical ability aside and begins to experiment that they really start to express themselves. If however they don't occasionally get a new pencil or learn how to use a new word processor they won't continue to be able to grow. It's the same for us as photographers we do occasionally need to get a new camera or learn a new technique. It's all a journey and one that goes around in a circle, new kit new techniques and experimentation all directed to produce great work. A circle you must never break and certainly never worship one part above all the others. I like to think I am an artist with a camera rather than just a competent photographer with great equipment.

The teacher in me likes to see people I have worked with master skills and kit and hopefully help them on that journey. What I really enjoy however is seeing them branch out and produce their own great work, their own expression. I can teach technique and mastery of kit but I in turn learn from those who put all that into practise and bring something of themselves to the business of 'making' photos, their photos, their art. Technical expertise and love of equipment is cold and expressionless. It can be bought or taught but without the artist being willing to take the risk of injecting something of themselves into the work it won't really excel. Wouldn't it be really good if we loved our work as much as we love our cameras and not one at the exclusion of the other?

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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