

“Being prepared” as a wildlife photographer

This article first appeared in my Autumn 2013 newsletter where it received such positive comment that I felt it worth including in the “Tips and Techniques” section of my website.

It was written following a very interesting and thought provoking question I was asked at a camera club where I gave a talk. “What do you do” the questioner asked “to ensure that your camera is always ready for action”.

I stumbled for a moment and repeated a mantra I was given over 30 years ago and often repeat, namely that there are 5 P’s to being a successful wildlife photographer.

- **Passion** - to do it in the first place
- **Patience** – to keep on trying
- **Practise** – and you will get better
- **Preparation** – research your quarry
- **Purpose** – be determined and go out with a purpose.



The last two, preparation and purpose, are the two I often refer to in this situation. I always tell enthusiastic wildlife photographers how important it is to do your preparation or research before going out and when you do go out go with a purpose. It was drummed into me long ago that the best wildlife photographs are those that are planned and prepared. As I repeated this thought I realised that many of my best photos were taken in a hurry when something unfolded in front of me.

The photo above of a Serval taken in Northern Tanzania in 2010 is one of my all-time favourites and is just such an example. We were driving along fairly early in the morning and the driver spotted the Serval, a nocturnal and shy hunter about ¼ mile in front of us. I had two camera bodies with me one with a 70-200mm f2.8 and the other with a 600mm f4 lens fitted. As the driver edged forward I intuitively picked up the 600mm and balanced it on a bean bag and took just 5 shots before the Serval ran off. Yes my experience helped in that I instinctively selected Av or Aperture Priority mode, opened up to f4 to get the soft Bokeh or background and checked the viewfinder to see if the shutter speed was at least 1/250 second. It wasn’t, so I reached for the ISO button and increased it to achieve the desired speed. Was this photo pure luck or was it a product of experience and being prepared? I like to think the later but what my questioner was asking constituted ‘being prepared’. I gave him a few carefully considered answers at the time but it’s something I have returned to since and thought a great deal more about. There are plenty of comments from photographers on their blogs on various websites which I am sure will add to these but my top 10 tips, in no particular order, are as follows.

1. Choose the best lens for the environment you are in.

I am tempted to say the longest telephoto you have but then that will be no good if something happens right in front of you or you are in dense woodland. If you read my article on long lenses in my last newsletter ([here](#)) you will know I am currently rethinking my selection of lenses. Zoom lenses are a good trade off but don’t always give the option for wide apertures and hence the very shallow depth of field I love. Prime lenses will, however, always be the wrong length – a well know photographic rule called ‘sods law’ or what I was once told by the headmistress of a girls public school should be referred to as the ‘law of inanimate malice’.

My option thus for always being prepared is a zoom but make sure it’s one with an appropriate range and certainly one that will reach as far as you might need for that small bird in a tree. One of my favourite lenses is the 70-200 f2.8. It is expensive and not always long enough but it is a great lens none the less. My next favourite is a prime and a heavy one at that the Canon 300mm f2.8L. Another lens I used and kept attached to my camera for a long time, but is not one I turn to often these days, is the Canon 100-400mm f4.5 5.6 L series zoom.

2. **Switch your camera to continuous shooting mode.**

With digital there is no longer the worry of taking too many photos by accident and whilst I am certainly not an advocate of the 'spray and pray' approach to photography I would rather take a few more pictures than miss a shot. That having been said with a little care you can learn how to gently press your shutter button to only take a single shot, if that's what you require, even when in continuous mode. For the record my view on the 'spray and pray' debate is the same as it is for so many other techniques in photography. Everything is right in the right situation and used properly. Continuous shooting has allowed me to get some shots I just wouldn't have got otherwise, such as the fish eagle opposite, and I really appreciate the faster shutters like the 14 frames per second on the Canon 1DX. I don't however ignore all the basic rules about judging exposure, selecting shutter speeds, choosing appropriate ISO values, careful focusing and basic good composition that are so central to a great photo. It comes back to 2 of the P's in the introduction to this article.



- Passion to get the very best photograph and to learn to use your camera to the best of yours and its ability. Remember great pictures can be taken by competent photographers with poor cameras but can never be taken by lazy photographers with the very best kit.
- Practise to keep on trying until the operation of your camera becomes second nature.

3. **Always travel with your lens cap off.**

Like me you were probably always brought up to take good care of your very expensive lenses but that's no good if as you raise the camera to your eye the lens cap is still on. This is a mistake that has lost me too many shots in the past. My solution is to leave the lens cap off but easily available in my pocket in case I need to replace it quickly in a rain (or in Africa dust) storm. I do however always use the lens hood which not only stops stray light from striking my lens but also gives a degree of protection to the front element. Whilst on the subject of protecting the front elements - some people swear by protective UV filters to save their expensive lens getting scratched. I personally don't bother with these as whatever you install on your lens, irrespective of the quality, will degrade the image slightly. They might protect your lens but at the cost of all your images being of lesser quality. Far better to take care not to scratch it by always using the lens hood, always replace the lens cap when in your bag and generally just being careful.

4. **Select the most appropriate focusing mode for the situation you are in.**

This one's a bit difficult as the premise behind this article is the need to have your camera ready 'whatever the situation' and clearly different situations will require different focusing modes. I find, however, that it always helps to have my camera in servo focus mode (continuous focus on Nikon) as then it will at least attempt to track a moving subject. Further I always choose the centre shutter point option – or expanded option on later Canons and Nikon. This way I have at least the best option to get the focus engine to lock onto a subject quickly and accurately. Equally learn how to select other modes quickly if you need to.

An alternative approach and those who know me or have been on any of my photo workshop will know that I am a keen advocate of 'back button focussing' – see the article on my website by clicking [here](#) or if not reading this on a screen in the Tips and Techniques section. If you have never tried this then my advice is to read the article linked to above, find a quiet afternoon and experiment on the birds in your back garden. As with all new techniques it's difficult to start with but after a little practise it becomes second nature and I promise you it will change your photography for ever.

One extra very and related important point make sure that your autofocus on your lens is turned on!

5. **Memory card and Battery.**

Whilst this is all too obvious I guess how many times have you gone to take a shot to find that either your battery has run out or your memory card is full! It is therefore great advice to check both before you go out on a shoot and to always carry spares in your pocket. With more and more cameras giving battery and memory card space information in your viewfinder it really pays to get in the habit of glancing at this every so often to ensure that you have enough for the next opportunity. You can use space and batteries very fast on a good days shooting.

Regarding carrying spares my advice here is to

- always carry your memory cards in a safe and secure memory card holder. Preferably a waterproof and brightly coloured one so you can spot it if you drop it. I use the 4 card holders from GePe and the fluorescent yellow ones – see right.
- always carry batteries with their protective cover so that they don't short out on keys or other metal items in your pocket and as close to your body as possible as they hold their charge better when warm.



6. **Leave the camera turned on.**

This one I guess links to the above in that it won't work if you don't have a fully charged battery and perhaps some spares. I have seen too many people stop to turn their camera on before taking a shot or worse still pressing the shutter button to observe nothing happening because they haven't turned the camera on. Most modern cameras have a sleep mode somewhere deep in the menus. Learn where this is and set it to perhaps 30 seconds. This way your camera will 'go to sleep' 30 seconds after non activity and thus preserve some battery charge but yet 'wake up' instantly when you press the shutter button.

7. **Learn the ISO capability of your camera and always select the best for the conditions.**

Cameras are improving all the time when it comes to high ISO performance. Hopefully gone are the days of higher and higher pixel counts and manufacturers are concentrating on making better not more pixels (although the new Nikon D800 seems to be a shift in this thinking). One of the questions I am asked most of all on a photo workshop is "what ISO should I be using?" My answer is always well that depends on your camera – what model are you using? However I do always suggest the highest speed that you can get away with whilst still producing a noise free image. This will of course give the highest shutter speed if shooting in Aperture Priority mode (see below) something I always advocate as the standby for wildlife shooting.

There is a very simple experiment which is well worth conducting and will help you to understand your particular camera's performance. Find a white object and a black object – maybe a white cat and a black cat – or even a black and white cat. Shoot them at all the ISO values your camera can manage and then check back on the photos to see which show no noise and which an acceptable level. You will find this varies enormously between cameras models but also between black and white objects. Noise shows up much more on black. When you are thus faced with shooting something like the swan opposite you will know what ISO values you can get away with. Whilst the swan is of course white there is so much black in this picture so you need to ensure that you have selected an ISO that will cope with the black.



8. Use Aperture priority mode and open your lens up to its widest aperture.

Whatever the situation if you are looking to ensure that you are prepared at all times you will probably be taking a quick shot of something that is moving. Shutter speed is thus the main consideration. You might thus think that you ought to shoot in Shutter Priority mode and select a high shutter speed.

My experience here though suggests otherwise. For example, what shutter speed is appropriate? Maybe a very high one just in case your subject is moving fast or you don't get the chance to steady your lens but then you risk not having enough light to form an exposure. Much better in my experience to shoot in Aperture Priority mode, select the maximum aperture possible. Then when you take a photo get into the habit of half pressing the shutter to take a meter reading; hesitating for a micro second whilst you glance at the shutter speed selected in the viewfinder; and shoot based on that. If the speed is too low but this is your only chance at a picture, take it anyway but brace your camera against camera shake by holding your breath and pulling it tight against your face. If you have the time, even a split second as I did with the Serval cat above, reach for the ISO button and dial in a few stops higher and shoot.



[Learn to read the settings in your viewfinder](#)

9. If your lens supports it consider turning on image stabilization.

If we are looking at being prepared at all times we won't usually have very much time to take the photo. Image stabilisation (vibration reduction on Nikon) certainly helps here and lets you get away with shooting one or more stops below what you would normally dare and does an excellent job of steadying an otherwise unsteady hand. Remember though that this will only stop blur caused by lens shake, not blur caused by fast moving subjects, hence the need to learn to check shutter speed in the viewfinder before shooting if you are to get that action shot.

10. Select the best white balance for the situation.

I have many friends who are excellent wildlife photographers who advocate selecting particular white balance settings in degrees Kelvin. Whilst this does work it is in my opinion overkill especially as you can always change this after the event if you shoot in RAW. My advice is, however, not always to shoot in Auto White Balance but that there is a lot to be gained from selecting e.g. cloudy when you want to warm the shots up a bit more, or even shade to take away some of the intense brightness you tend to get on a sunny day even when under a limited amount of shade. This is one its best to experiment with and get to know what effect you achieve but do – the results are well worth it and it's something I will return to in a future newsletter.



[This male lion was shot roaring at 6400 ISO at dusk using the white balance on the cloudy setting.](#)

Remember most of all what an old sage and expert wildlife photographer once told me - and it's worth noting that this was when I shot film and you had a lot fewer options and 'settings' to change.

[“Left over settings give left over photos.”](#)

As a post script; it always pays to carry your camera in a way you can access it quickly and easily but also so that it's reasonably protected. Backpacks are great but not easy to access. I am currently trying out the ThinkTank range of modular belt based holsters and cases and will return with my view of these in a future newsletter.

In addition to all these though I think that I have to state that there is no substitute for learning how to change settings on your camera on the fly without taking your eye from the viewfinder. A little time spent practising these at home in a non-pressured environment will lead to far more great shots and far less frustration. Learn where the controls are by feel. There are not many important ones and I would list these as

- ISO - learn where the ISO button is by feel and how to change this on the fly
- Shutter and Aperture priority mode – learn how to swap these and where the indicator is in the view finder that tells you which you have selected
- Shutter speed and Aperture setting – learn which wheel changes these. This will clearly be linked to the mode selected above
- Exposure compensation – this one is a little more advanced but is really key when shooting in the natural world where you might be faced very high levels of dynamic range. Most cameras display this in the viewfinder and allow you to shift it easily with a wheel or buttons. Learn where they are and what effects achieve what.