



THE ART OF WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

15 TIPS FOR BETTER WILDLIFE PHOTOS



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TEXT AND IMAGES BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

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LEARN, PRACTISE, PRACTISE SOME MORE, REPEAT!

For the past 23 years, I have been honing my wildlife photography skills. My original photography mentor, Glen Threlfo, a master wildlife photographer and nature documentary-maker, taught me lots of valuable techniques in-the-field. I made lots of mistakes, I was frustrated, yet I kept persevering. I learnt new skills, worked at mastering them, then went back to learn some more. Through my failures in the early days, I was able to quickly learn the best ways to photograph wildlife. Over the years, I continually keep absorbing new information, learn new techniques and am open to different ways used by different photographers. You never stop learning...

The thing is, no one should ever tell you that a certain techniques is the ONLY way, as there are often different ways to achieve the same result. Yes, rules were definitely meant to be broken! Listen, absorb, try new things and above all, practise, then practise some more. The more you get out there and shoot, the more familiar you will be with your camera and its settings. One thing in common with many of the 'masters' of photography is that they all made mistakes, learned from them, then practised until they perfected their craft.

If you aren't getting the results you are hoping for, then this E-book on Wildlife Photography Tips may be just what you need. I hope my wildlife photography tips and images inspire you to get out there and try different techniques. Be creative, be individual and don't be afraid of failure. Above all, make sure you enjoy the journey!

Happy Photography :-))

Michael Snedic

Professional Wildlife Photographer and owner of WildNature Photo Expeditions

ABOUT MICHAEL

"Photography is my life and I adore being outdoors, photographing wildlife and nature. I am passionate about my craft and greatly enjoy sharing my knowledge with other photographers. I am the owner of WildNature Photo Expeditions, having presented photography workshops and tours across Australia and the world since 2002. I am a feature writer for Australia's largest-selling photography magazine Australian Photography, am a Nikon School tutor (although I know all brands of camera very well) and a regular presenter of audiovisuals at camera clubs across Australia"





I spent ages following this Red-capped Robin. I waited until it landed on an open branch with a clear background.

“To photograph is to hold one’s breath, when all faculties converge to capture fleeting reality. It’s at that precise moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.”

- Henri Cartier-Bresson

01 WATCH AND OBSERVE

Even before you pick up a camera, take the time to sit and watch the wildlife you want to photograph. Getting to know your subject gives you a much higher chance of 'nabbing' the shot. In a lot of cases you will see a pattern emerge. It could be a specific movement the animal makes just before jumping away or flying off. Or it could be the fact that each day, at a particular time, the subject (or subjects), turn up briefly at one spot to feed, preen or perform a courtship display. If you know the animal's habits, you'll have a better chance of being there, with a camera to your eye, when the best moments happen!



In the whale image featured, I spent many hours, over a number of years, observing Humpbacked whale behaviour. I noticed that when one breaches, there will often be successive breaches. After a breach, I instinctively focus my lens just in front of that spot, hoping for that next one to happen. In this case, I 'struck gold'!



With the osprey, I observed this individual over a three year period, going on 50-60 boat trips in the process. I knew its favourite perching spots, when the fish were plentiful and which tide was best (in this case, it was low tide, making it easier for the osprey to dive for the fish). As soon as the osprey started its dive, I pressed my shutter button and took a whole series of images, my focus point following the bird all the way.

02 IT'S ALL ABOUT THE EYES



This baby Australasian Sea Lion just lay on the sand and looked directly into my eyes. Such a tender moment between subject and photographer...

When I started out in wildlife photography some 23 years ago, one of the first things I learned was to focus on the eyes. If the eyes are out of focus, the image is ruined. One of the things you can do to help get the eyes in focus is to choose the single focus point and move it around until it is on the animal's eye. Another option, when using the camera's single focus point, is to focus on the eyes. Then, half-depress the shutter button, and while keeping your finger on the button, recompose your image.



Patience was needed for the shot of the Mountain Gorilla with her baby. I spent ages focusing on mum's eyes, while she held her sleeping baby. As soon as she looked at me, I clicked my camera's shutter button.

*“Look deep into nature, and then you
will understand everything better.”*

- Albert Einstein

03 RULES CAN WORK BUT WERE ALSO MEANT TO BE BROKEN!

One of the most important aspects of creating a great wildlife image is good composition. You can own the most expensive photographic equipment, use all the correct settings and be in all the right places at the right times, but without good composition your images just won't grab people's attention.

Avoid putting your subject directly in the centre of your image. Try composing in a way that the subject's eye or head is positioned over one of the intersecting 'rule of thirds' lines. (The 'rule of thirds' is a method of composition that sees the image divided into imaginary thirds, like a 'noughts and crosses' grid. The key element of the picture is positioned over one of the four intersecting points.) Using a wide aperture can be an effective way to blur the background, reduce distractions and put the emphasis on the main subjects.

Having said that, there are many instances where rules are meant to be broken! If it 'feels' right, it usually is right. Try different angles, zoom in and out, go portrait – basically experiment, as you have nothing to lose.



For the image of the Emerald Spotted Tree Frog, the rule of thirds was used. I lined up the frog's eyes so that they were precisely on either side of the intersecting grid lines.



For the image of the Tasman Boobies sitting on a grass on top of a cliff, there should have been more room in the direction the birds were looking into (instead of behind), yet in this instance the image still works. Yes, rules were meant to be broken!



This baby Gorilla was practising his chest beating, just like his dad. A wonderful moment captured...

“To consult the rules of composition before making a picture is a little like consulting the law of gravitation before going for a walk.”

– Edward Weston

04 BACK BUTTON FOCUS

Many SLR cameras offer back-button focusing. This setting is invaluable for wildlife photography, especially for capturing birds-in-flight and other moving wildlife. Explained simply, back-button focusing allows you to focus on the animal you are photographing by pressing a button on the back of your camera, then depressing the shutter button to take the shot. This setting is very useful for photographing a bird flying in a parallel line. With the camera's focus-point on the bird, keep following it as it is flying, finger half depressed on the shutter. When the bird is in a good position, simply let go of the focus button and take a series of shots (make sure you also use continuous shot or 'burst'). Even though you have let your finger off the focus button, your focus will remain on the bird as it is flying past, rather than focusing on the background. It may take a bit of getting used to but with practice, back-button focus will become second nature. Once you start using it, you will wonder why you didn't change years ago!



With the Lilac-breasted Roller featured, back-button focus was invaluable. I was able to keep exact focus on the bird as it was coming straight towards me, then fire off a series of shots.

“When words become unclear, I shall focus with photographs. When images become inadequate, I shall be content with silence.”

- Ansel Adams

05 WATCH FOR UNWANTED BACKGROUNDS!



In the case of the image featured, the Acacia tree was sticking right up the back of the cheetah's head, so I asked our safari driver to move until it was balanced with the head of the cheetah

If I earned a dollar for every time I have seen beautiful images spoiled by unwanted subjects, such as trees or branches sticking up behind an animal's head, I would be a rich man :-). This error is a common one that many wildlife photographers make. It is easy to get caught up in the 'excitement' of photographing wildlife, especially in places such as Africa, where the diversity and number of animals is endless, interactions can be breathtaking and often at incredibly close range.

I recommend you look at your surroundings first and when there is potential to take an interesting shot, try and line it up so that you don't have distractions in the background. I asked our safari guide to drive our vehicle a few metres forward, so that the tree was balanced opposite to where the cheetah was resting.

The guides I have used over the years I have presented photo safaris in Africa have all been very accommodating. They don't mind you asking them to move their vehicles to get the best possible background or lighting conditions. During my recent Kenyan Photo Safari, our guides were all very experienced and knew exactly where we needed to be, often without me having to ask each time. Definitely an advantage!

06 CREATIVE SILHOUETTES AND BACKLIT IMAGES



I saw this Cape Barren Goose on its own, walking along an open field. I raced around so I had the sun positioned behind the bird and waited until it lifted up its leg, before taking the shot.

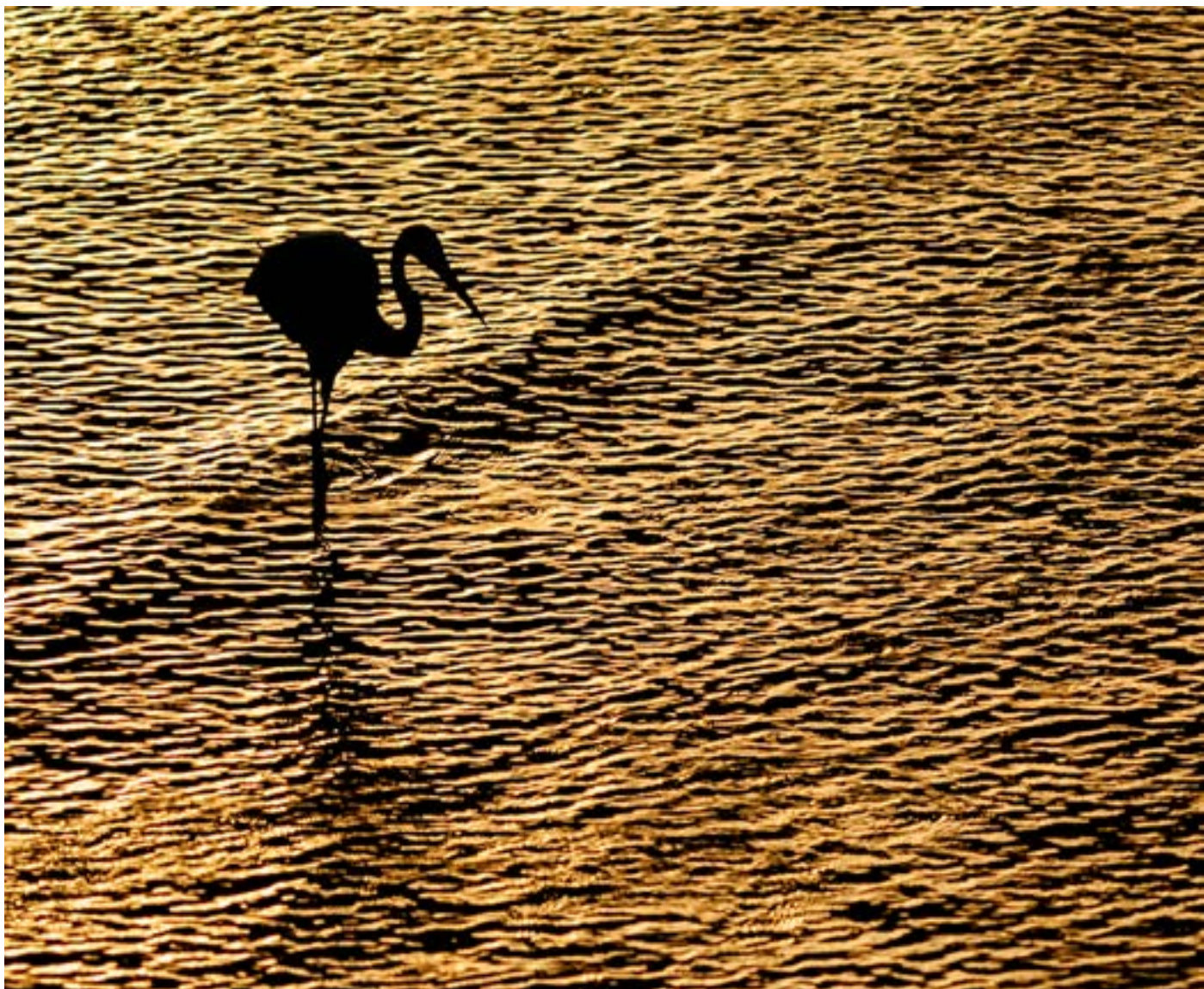
I personally am a big fan of silhouetted and backlit images of wildlife. Rather than showing a clear picture of the subject, silhouettes and backlighting can convey a real sense emotion, mood and even mystery. I love the simplicity of these images...

The technique needed in taking silhouette shots is to place your subject in front of the rising or setting sun and then expose your camera to the brightest part, the background (not the subject). By doing this, your background is perfectly exposed, whilst the subject will be totally underexposed. Presto, you have created a silhouette:-))

My preference when setting up backlit images is to do so early in the morning or close to sunset, when the sun is positioned low in the sky. Find a subject (such as the Cape Barren Goose featured here) and place the sun behind it. This has two benefits: one is to stop unsightly glare from the sun from entering your lens and the second is to create a halo around your subject. Take a shot, then change your exposure until you have the required effect.



There were lots of giraffes around as the sun was setting. I ended up finding two where there were no background distractions, except the fiery sky. I exposed for the background and a silhouetted image was created.



Photographing this Great Egret as a well-exposed image didn't work, due to the strong light reflecting off the water. I exposed for the background and created a silhouetted image instead.



Our Safari guide/driver knew exactly where to position our vehicle, in order to capture the backlighting behind the ears of these baby Black-backed Jackals.

07 PHOTOGRAPHING ANIMALS IN THEIR ENVIRONMENT

While I enjoy photographing close-up portrait or behavioral images of wildlife, I also like photographing animals in their environment. This is where the subject is a minute part of a landscape. By choosing a landscape that works in its own right, and then photographing an animal in that environment, it creates so much more interest.

This style of photography also adds context to an image by placing the subject in its natural habitat. The secret is to not make the animal miniscule, or it can become lost in the image. To successfully create such an image, the subject needs to be composed in a way that the viewer's eyes are drawn to it (for example, the footprints leading to the polar bear below).

In this image, the landscape was quite simple, with lovely light. Even though the polar bear was tiny in the image, its bright golden colour made it stand out.



The tracks behind the polar bear gave this image a sense of scale and takes the viewer's eyes from where it has been, to where it is going.



I saw this pair of penguins 'dancing' on top of a gorgeous ice setting. I waited for them to be in position, then fired away!



This image shows a Golden Orb spider in its environment, in the rain. The early morning sun created the rainbow colours in the web.

08 THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPOSURE



Checking exposure on white birds such as this White Tern, flying high in the sky, is very important, as you can easily over or under expose the image

Exposure is another aspect of photography which is difficult to correct in post-processing, if it's incorrect. Sure, a bit of over exposure or under exposure can be corrected in programs such as Photoshop or Lightroom (especially when shooting in RAW), but if your image is too over-exposed, no amount of manipulating will improve the image.

“I would much rather ‘get it right in camera’ and spend more time out in nature, than spend wasted hours post-processing images that were shot using poor technique”

Once the whites are over-blown or washed out, you are simply trying to ‘rectify’ a bad image. An overblown image that has been worked on will never win a competition or make the cover of a magazine! Quite simply, learn the correct settings to use, such as metering, exposure compensation etc. Once you have mastered what settings are needed for different situations, your ‘strike-rate’ of correctly exposed images will improve greatly.

“Taking pictures is savouring life intensely, every hundredth of a second”

- Marc Riboud

09 LENS CHOICE



This Leopard Seal had just finished eating a penguin. It swam towards my zodiac, looking very pleased with itself.

Lens choice is quite important when photographing wildlife. Using a longer focal length (a lens that goes to 400, 500 or even 600mm) is recommended. This enables you to fill the frame of your camera, rather than getting a miniscule image. Sure, you can always crop images where the subject is tiny, but you end up losing way too many pixels. This means that if you plan to print your image at a reasonable size, you won't have the quality due to the reduced pixels.

One thing to consider when looking to buy a large lens for wildlife photography, is the weight. You need to be able to hand-hold the lens comfortably for a set amount of time. Lenses with a wide minimum aperture (for example, f2.8) are perfect for capturing 'action' shots of wildlife, as they are regarded as 'fast' lenses. The wider the minimum aperture, the faster the shutter becomes. This is very important when trying to freeze movement for a fast-moving animal. The downside of lenses with wide apertures is that they are usually quite heavy and also much more expensive than lenses with smaller minimum apertures (in size). Quite simply, this means setting your aperture to the widest that your zoom or telephoto lens allows. This could be f2.8, f4, f5.6 or even f6.3 for some zooms with longer focal lengths. That way, you are letting in the most amount of light possible, as well as helping to blur out the background. If your subject is a fair distance away, and you own a lens that stops down to f2.8, this will be fine for getting the whole animal in focus. If your subject is much closer, then setting your aperture to f4 or f5.6 will allow great depth-of-field, otherwise only a part of the animal will be in focus.



Even though you don't see the animal being eaten by the lion, you can see the look of concentration on its face.

*"Taking pictures is savouring life
intensely, every hundredth of a second"*

- Marc Riboud



Getting down low and at eye level was the key to making this image work, from a composition point-of-view

10 PATIENCE, PATIENCE, PATIENCE

If you enjoy photographing wildlife and are looking to capture behaviour shots, one of the most important things to remember is patience. After 23 years of wildlife photography, I have spent hours, days and even weeks (often sitting in a confined, camouflaged hide), waiting for THE moment to press the shutter button. I have never looked back and thought “that wasn’t worth it”. The longer you wait for a particular behaviour to occur and the more often you head out into the field with your camera, the better chance you will have of capturing those ‘special’ images.

Watching a particular species beforehand and observing their behavior goes a long way to predicting what ‘may’ possibly happen. You still need infinite patience waiting around but at least you will be better prepared to capture that special moment with your camera, when it occurs. As the old saying goes ‘Patience Is A Virtue’.



The Scarlet Robin was flying around erratically, trying desperately to capture quick-flying moths. Patience was definitely needed but eventually I nabbed the shot

“Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst.”

– Henri Cartier-Bresson



I saw the elephant walking towards me, after it had finished its mud bath. Often they will blow dust onto themselves just after this ritual. I waited patiently until the exact moment when it started blowing dust on itself and fired a series of shots.



Much patience required for both the photographer and the lion 'dad' :-))

11 MOTION BLUR FOR AN ARTY EFFECT

When you want a crisp, clear shot of a moving animal, you need to use a fast shutter speed. You can also be creative, especially in low light, using what is commonly known as 'motion blur' in photography circles. Motion blur for capturing moving wildlife is, in simple terms, the purposeful blurring of fast-moving subjects. Use a slow shutter speed and experiment. Once you have the required speed, start shooting away.

PS - If conditions are quite bright, you can easily over expose your image, so low light conditions are preferable.



I was in a zodiac in the Russian Far East, when I encountered thousands of Crested Auklets. The light conditions weren't favourable for capturing sharp action shots, so I set my shutter speed to a low speed, then panned as the birds flew.

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

– Ansel Adams



The Albert's Lyrebird is incredibly shy and elusive. Less than a handful of photographers have ever photographed this bird displaying. It took an incredible 6 weeks and 5 days, sitting in a camouflaged hide, to finally capture one displaying.

“Keep your love of nature, for that is the true way to understand art more and more.”

- Vincent Van Gogh

12 GETTING CLOSE



For the frog image, I decided to concentrate on just one eye, as the golden colour stood out against the green really well.

Getting close-up shots of wildlife can be very rewarding. You don't need to always photograph the whole animal. A different take on an animal is to photograph a small section of it. That way the viewer's eyes aren't being diverted in any way by any peripheral distractions. It draws your eyes towards the subject you have focused on, whereas anything outside of where you composed your image, is left to one's imagination.

If the animal is a subject such as a frog, you can use a macro lens since they will often allow you to get quite close. Try choosing one eye and capturing the intricate detail and colour of that eye (see left image). Another option is to concentrate on the feathers of a bird, the fur of a mammal or the scales of a reptile, creating a series of intricate patterns.



With the Green Tree Python, it was the middle of winter when I took this shot, so the snake didn't move a millimetre (due to the cold). This made for easy close access with my camera.

13 ABSTRACT IMAGES



Capturing just a part of an animal can make for an interesting abstract image

Photographers often capture images of wildlife that fit into the 'normal' rules of photography. Their aim is to produce the perfect replica of what they are seeing. There is nothing wrong with this style of photography, but why not trying things that are different and don't fit into any distinct category?

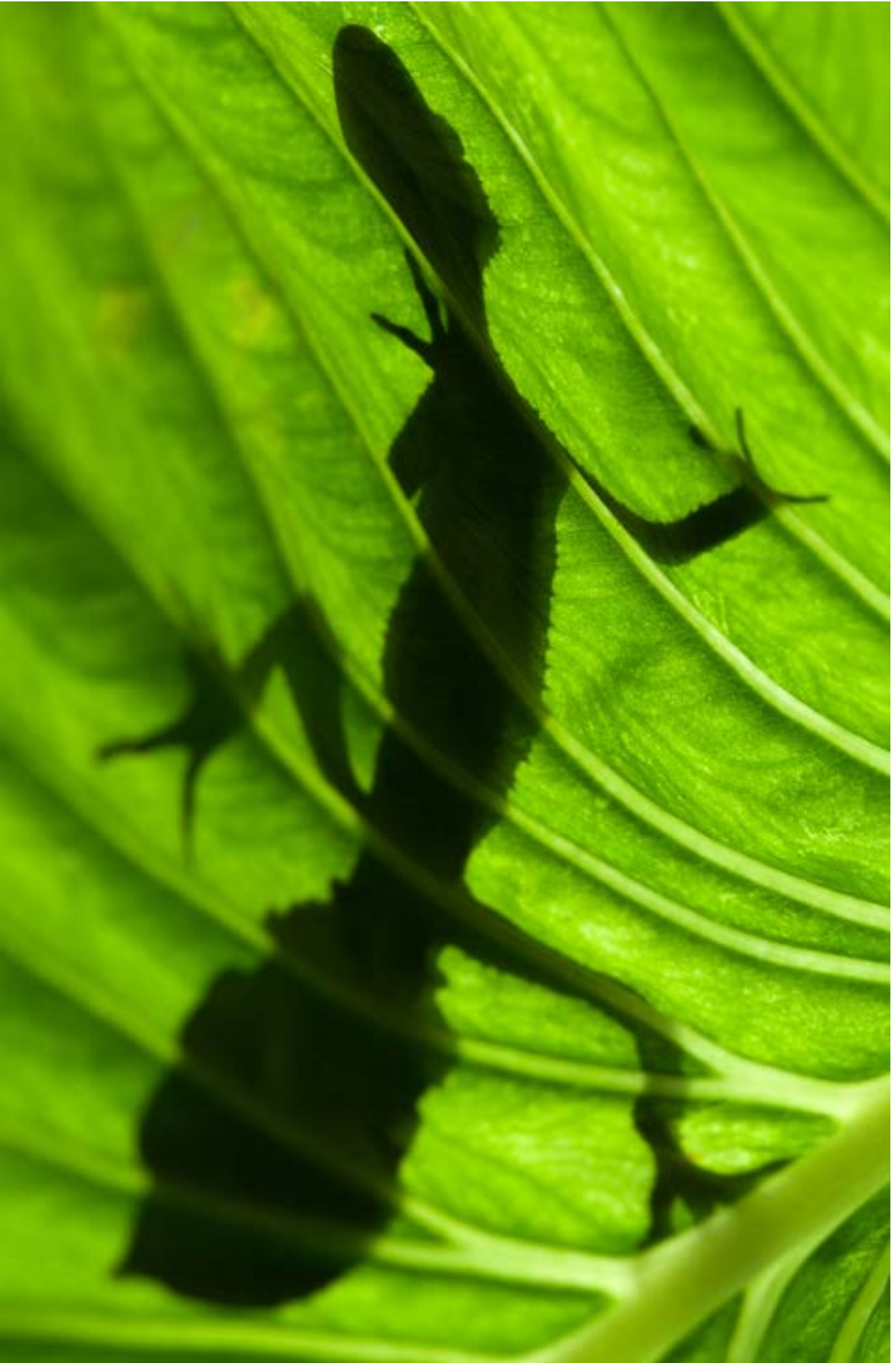
So what is wildlife abstract photography? It's a way of portraying the subject, or subjects, that are outside the 'norm' or less conventional. With abstract photography, you are only limited to your imagination. You may concentrate on photographing a particular part of an animal's anatomy (scales, fur or feathers). Another form of abstract photography is photographing a particular section of a large group of animals, such as the King Penguins featured here.

With an abstract photo, the actual content of the photograph is far less important than the actual texture, colour or patterns. What I love about abstract photos is that when you first look at them, often you can't work out what you are looking at. On closer investigation, you work it out. The image makes you think!!

Abstract wildlife photography is a fantastic way to bring a little extra creativity into your work. The final images may not be something you've thought of before, but exploring these techniques and ideas will help to improve your process and creative thinking when you're out in the field, whether looking for abstract images or not.



Focusing on a large mass of animals and just showing that section, is a great way of creating an abstract image.



Even though you don't see the gecko clearly, you can tell what it is by the shape created by the silhouette.

14 BORING BACKGROUNDS

Lately, there seems to be a plethora of images being posted on Facebook, Instagram etc where the photographers have worked to create a pastel look, in post-processing. The thing is, doing this occasionally is fine but some photographers, who actually take great photos, do this for every image. To me, this is quite bland, as each image looks the same. When photographing wildlife out in nature, you have backgrounds of varying types, colours, textures and exposure. Use this to your advantage and think about your background as much as you do your actual subject.

My suggestion is to work hard in the field to choose a decent background (if possible), without distractions. Choose the time of the day where lighting is at its best, such as sunrise, sunset or on a day where there is mist in the air. When post-processing, I never cloned backgrounds into my images and never will, as I'm a bit of a 'purist' and work at getting it right in camera.



This cloudy sky made for a perfect contrast to this sunlit Sulphur-crested Cockatoo fly by.

“It takes a lot of imagination to be a good photographer. You need less imagination to be a painter because you can invent things. But in photography everything is so ordinary; it takes a lot of looking before you learn to see the extraordinary.”

– David Bailey

15 RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT

There are a number of photographic accessories that are invaluable when photographing wildlife. Hand-holding a large lens can be quite difficult and tiring, especially for long periods of time. If your subject is stationed in one spot (the subject could be preening, displaying, bathing, feeding etc), then a tripod with some type of gimbal, like a Wimberley, is highly recommended. A gimbal lets you move the camera and lens in all directions quite easily, without getting sore arms and shoulders.

If your plan is to walk a reasonable distance with a heavy camera and lenses, a carbon-fibre monopod with a dedicated monopod head might be the way to go. Much lighter than a tripod, a monopod doesn't offer quite the same degree of stability but it does give you more freedom to move around.

Another useful piece of equipment is a photographer's beanbag, which is handy for stabilising heavy lenses. Beanbags can be filled with rice, birdseed or beans and can be placed on car bonnets or half-opened car windows, rocks or fence posts. You'll be amazed at how much beanbags help minimise movement of your camera and lens, allowing for shots to be taken at quite low shutter speeds.

I also recommend using some sort of neoprene covering for your lenses and tripods, to protect them from scratches, bumps and dust. I use a brand called 'Lenscoat'.

I also suggest using a rain cover for your camera and lens, especially if you are lot of outdoor photography.





"It takes a lot of imagination to be a good photographer. You need less imagination to be a painter because you can invent things. But in photography everything is so ordinary; it takes a lot of looking before you learn to see the extraordinary."

- David Bailey

NEVER COMPROMISE YOUR SUBJECT'S WELFARE

The reason I got into wildlife photography some 23 years ago, was to try and capture, in camera, some of the incredible wildlife experiences I was experiencing out in nature. My love of wildlife, and the natural world in general, has been with me since I was a very young boy and I have always had the utmost respect for their welfare.

Unfortunately, I have heard of some distressing stories over the years, where animals have been made to suffer, in the name of 'getting the shot'. For example, I have heard of photographers pinning down live mice, still squealing, so as to attract birds of prey and get that 'action shot'. All done to win the top prize in a photography competition. To me, this is utterly deplorable and I have no time whatsoever for photographers who use such methods.

Setting up near a bird's nest, trying to get the shot of chicks being fed, can inadvertently attract Currawongs (these Australian birds will rip apart any chicks they find in nests). You may not have realised this and your actions were innocent, but it's points like this you need to know.

Removing a twig or grasses in front of a bird's nest to get a better shot may seem harmless, yet that twig or grass stems are what may hide the entrance of the nest from potential predators.

Even picking up a frog and placing it into a more photogenic position seems totally innocuous, yet if you have lotion or insect repellent on your hands, you could inadvertently kill the frog.

Have empathy for your subjects. Please try and put yourself in the animal's place and respect its/their 'space'. Don't get too close and don't yell or be noisy. If the animal looks nervous and starts to move away, often that's because it's getting uncomfortable with your presence.

By being empathic with your subject, you will have a greater chance of the animal(s) hanging around and acting naturally. You are therefore rewarded by getting the shots you had hoped for.

By observing wildlife behaviour beforehand, you will also be more attuned to how that individual may react at certain times.

In short, please strive to have minimal or no impact on the wildlife you are photographing and the environment they live in.



*Thanks for reading my E-book – **The Art of Wildlife Photography**. I hope you enjoyed it and found the information useful.*

QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions, please email me at: info@wildnaturephotoexpeditions.com

If you are interested in any of my wildlife and nature photography tours, both in Australia and overseas, please click on the link: [HERE](#)



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