

The Essential Guide To Wildlife Photography

Written by Nina Bailey

Especially for Canon EOS cameras



A close-up profile of a cheetah's head and neck, looking towards the left. The cheetah has a light tan coat with dark spots and a black tear line under its eye. The background is a soft-focus savanna landscape with dry grass and green shrubs.

PREVIEW
EDITION

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www.eos-magazine.com/ebooks/es/

Foreword by the author

Over the years I have written many different guides, scripts, technical publications and more presentations than I really care to remember, but this is my fifth ebook.

One of my favourite areas of photography is photographing wildlife, I have travelled all over the world to get the images you see in this book and have been privileged to be able to shoot up close and personal to many of the subjects in places such as Antarctica and Galápagos.

It's an area of photography that can equally be enjoyed close to home and we have a great selection of birds and mammals that can be photographed easily around the UK.

The equipment required can be fairly basic although to get some of the shots I am showing in this book you do need lenses of 400mm and longer. Those can be hired for a specific trip rather than bought if the lens is only going to get used for a couple of weeks each year.

It's an area of photography that can be enjoyed all year around, and in winter some of our wildlife reserves can be spectacular with the winter visitors to our shores.

My aim is to give you a good understanding of what you need to grasp to get some great wildlife images and what settings are needed. I have also looked at the creative side of this type of photography looking at framing, lighting and seeing the best images to take in addition to the more factual approaches.

Hopefully the images and explanations will inspire you to go out and get the very best images of the subjects that are all around us.

Nina





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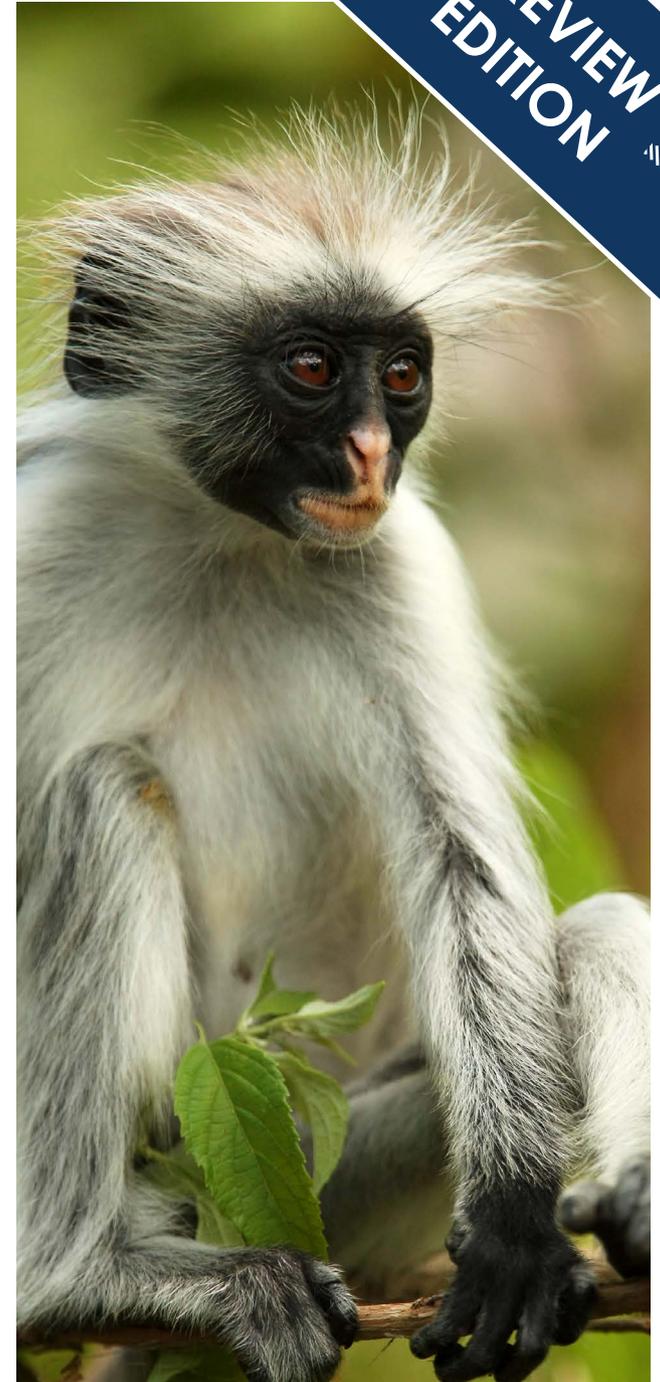
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Chapter 01

Introduction

This was taken at Lake Nakuru in Kenya. Some years there can be up to 2 million flamingos on the lake which gives spectacular images.

Introduction

Wildlife photography is very popular, and it's not surprising; animals are fascinating. Trying to capture them produces unique challenges, and can take you to some of the very remotest places on earth.

We are often inspired by some of the wonderful wildlife programmes that are on television, which show us fantastic images of amazing behaviour from the wildlife with which we share this earth.

Wildlife photography, covers a very wide range of subjects. All of these are going to need slightly different shooting styles.

Subjects can be as diverse as anything from small rodents up to large mammals, so the actual difference in size can be quite immense.

Some subjects are going to move slowly or will even be static for much of the time, making them easy to capture.

Others move at great speed, and will require specialist knowledge and equipment to capture them successfully. It is an area of photography that can prove very challenging, as we are often working in low light levels. An in-depth understanding of photography and how to get the light you need, is essential.

It is an area of photography, where the equipment requirements can vary enormously. This depends on the subjects being photographed and the aims of the photographer, as to the type of equipment that is going to be needed.



A walrus hauled out on the ice in Spitsbergen. I was able to get relatively close and so this was shot with a 400mm lens

It is however, an area of photography that can be enjoyed with minimal amounts of equipment, by carefully selecting subjects and shooting techniques.

The equipment requirements can be minimised by simply choosing to shoot the whole subject rather than just parts of the subject and avoiding shooting the high speed subjects.

With such a broad array of different subjects

to choose from, there are many different challenges to photographing them. It is an area of photography where there are no magic wand settings that work for every subject that you are going to come across.

So you really do need to know your camera in depth, and be able to set up the required settings quickly and easily.

PREVIEW
EDITION

Chapter 02

Approaches to wildlife photography

A shot taken in the UK which is very easy to get, all you need is some bread, a volunteer to throw it up and some gulls and you have plenty of subjects to practice on.

Approaches to wildlife photography



A meerkat shot at a UK zoo with just a 300mm lens.



A primate hanging around in a zoo with a 300mm lens.



A boobie taken in the Galápagos.

Wildlife photography covers a very wide array of different subjects. It is an area that can be as complex or simple as you choose to make it.

One of the things that really needs to be thought about at the outset is where, when and what you are going to shoot. This is going to make a big difference in virtually all the images that you take.

There are many photographers who photograph “wildlife” but mainly shoot captive animals in zoos and safari parks. There is nothing wrong with this; it will require less equipment and technical expertise than shooting in the wild.

For this type of photography you will need a reasonably long telephoto lens, but any digital SLR camera will be able to get good results.

If you photograph in the wild then one of the issues can be getting close to your subjects.

In some locations such as the Galápagos Islands this is very easy. In others you will be much further away, sometimes shooting on foot, at other times shooting from small boats and vehicles, which changes both equipment requirements and techniques.

Shooting in zoos and safari parks

Zoos and safari parks offer some great opportunities to the photographer. They are great places to practice for all photographers, providing a wealth of subjects at close range and with one great benefit – they are there and you don't have to go looking for them.

There are two distinctly different types of locations in the UK. Traditional zoos have smaller enclosures, providing good opportunities for close up and more intimate images of the animals and birds.

However, the backgrounds can be very cluttered and can rarely be described as natural looking.

As a result the photographers have to look carefully at the subject and think hard about how the image can be made to work.

There is great variation between different zoos. Some lend themselves to photography much better than others.

I find in the zoos it is better to concentrate on some of the smaller animals and birds as they are often in much more accessible enclosures and often do a lot more than some of the "stars" at the zoos such as the big cats.

There are also a number of safari parks. These differ from traditional zoos in that, you normally drive yourself around the park.

So you have the benefit of being in with the animals and usually no bars or glass to deal with. The enclosures are bigger and it is possible to get very natural looking images with a little patience



The red pandas are great characters and seldom move fast making them ideal subjects.



Many of the bird enclosures allow you to go inside with the birds.



These terns live with the penguins and you can get within just a few feet.

Shooting in zoos and safari parks

and careful framing. It does mean however that you will be shooting from a vehicle.

This can take a little getting use to and if you are on your own, the steering wheel can make it difficult to handle a large camera and lens.

Much of the time you will be able to have the vehicle windows open, but for the more dangerous animals such as the big cats and primates the windows need to be up and so you have the problems of shooting through glass.

There are some locations where there is both a more traditional zoo and a drive round section offering a wider range of opportunities.

As they both have their own issues we are going to look at the approaches that work in these locations separately.

Photographing in zoos

In zoos, animals are going to be in enclosures. Traditionally this is going to be behind bars, however, more and more the zoos are looking at enclosures that are secure but allow better viewing. They often use moats and electric wire to keep the animals secure in the enclosures.

The more harmless the animals, the closer you are likely to get and the better view.

There are a number of zoos now where you can walk through the enclosures and so get much better opportunities.

Lemurs, birds, fruit bats and some of the smaller



Leopards are always a favourite, but you have to be lucky to see them up and about.

monkeys are common inhabitants of these enclosures.

The more dangerous animals will be kept in much more secure accommodation. So the viewing and shooting can often be through bars or glass.

The better the view you get of the animals, generally the better the images you are going

to get. We find that the best images in zoos are always of the animals in the enclosures with better access.

The photography is at its best if you do not have to shoot through bars or glass.

Shooting through bars



It is possible to make bars completely disappear from the image. However, to do this there are a number of factors that come into play. You need to be nearer to the bars than the animal.

With modern day health and safety rules this presents a number of problems, as you are often not able to get close enough to the bars to make this technique work. Ideally if you can put the camera against the bars this technique works well.

The sequence of images that we are showing above have the lens touching the bars, but the bird was only a couple of feet the other side of the bars.

These bars were silver in colour and as a result have shown up quite quickly in the images that I took.

You need to have a lens about 200mm, or ideally longer, plus you need to be shooting at a reasonably wide aperture – f4 or f5.6 is ideal.

The longer the lens that you shoot with the more successful this technique will be and the further

away from the bars you will be able to stand and still make them disappear.

Make sure that you are zoomed in as much as possible, if you are using a 70-300mm lens but are actually set to 70mm the effect is simply not going to work. This means that shots with tight framing, often just the head of the animal are going to be more successful than whole body shots.

The optics on the extreme range lenses such as the 18-200mm or longer often prevents this being totally effective and it may be impossible to lose the bars.

The technique works best if the bars are a matt black. Unfortunately the zoos seem to like gloss green. If the sun is reflecting off the bars it can make them virtually impossible to lose.

The shot on the right shows what can be achieved with this technique.



Shooting through glass



An aardvark shot through glass.

This can be difficult; you need to be right up against the glass in most instances to avoid the reflections. Ideally wear black yourself which stops your reflection causing issues.

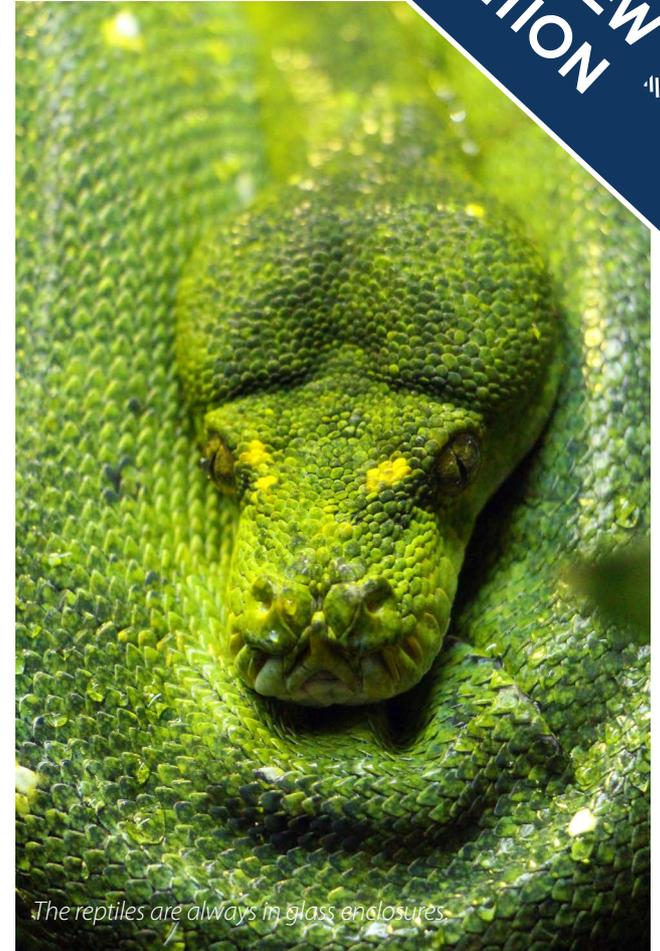
It can also help to go to the zoos on quieter days when there are not so many people around wearing bright colours to cause reflections which can be impossible to avoid.



In this koala enclosure there was no alternative but to shoot through the glass.

Often you need to shoot quite high to minimise the problems of dirt and smudges on the glass. The glass is often laminated for strength.

Make sure that there is not a polarising filter fitted to the lens when shooting as this may show up stress patterns in the glass.



The reptiles are always in glass enclosures.

The zoos seem to be trying to make the viewing easier by having the glass viewing panels in the shade or even better, enclosed by a building.

This stops the reflections in the glass to a good degree and makes the shooting much easier. There will be times when the glass is too scratched or too dirty to get a good image.

Photographing in safari parks

The main advantage of safari parks is that the animals are in bigger enclosures and it is often possible to get natural backgrounds to your images.

However, it also means that the animals can get further away from you as well. I plan to get round the driving loop a couple of times as the animals that are out of reach first time often are closer on the next circuit.

This type of shooting is easier if you can get someone to drive for you. I find the back seat minus any other passengers the ideal option, as you can then shoot out both sides of the vehicle.

Safari parks are particularly good for photographing the hoofed animals, such as antelope and deer.

They are not ideal for subject such as the big cats. Windows have to be closed in these enclosures and this often means shooting through tinted or darken glass in many modern cars. This will give problems with light levels and reflections.

Turn your engine off when shooting; it stops the vibrations which can cause camera shake.

One of the other problems is that many parks sell food for children to feed the animals. This results in the animals coming right up to the vehicle making them too close to focus on.

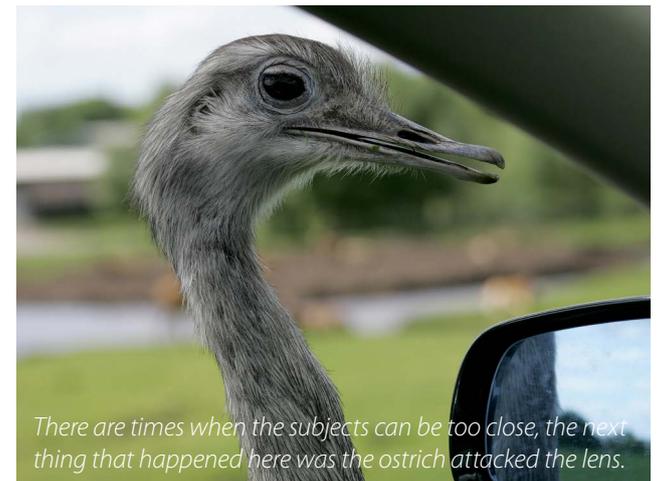
Shooting midweek at the parks means that there are far less cars and generally less feeding and so the animals keep a better distance.



One advantage of safari parks is the very natural backgrounds that you get in the images.



The animals are very used to the cars and quite often will be close enough to only need a 200mm or 300mm lens.



There are times when the subjects can be too close, the next thing that happened here was the ostrich attacked the lens.

Photographing on safari trips

One of the popular ways to photograph animals is to go on a safari to see them.

This offers a number of advantages to the photographer, but can mean that you need longer lenses as it is not always possible to get as close to the animals as you can in captivity.

The key advantages are that you have the animals in their natural surroundings, so you can take the whole animal looking very natural; something that is not always possible in captivity.

You also are generally going to be shooting from a vehicle and so the size and weight of the outfit is not too much of an issue, as you are not carrying it for the whole day.

You also normally have a driver that doubles up as your wildlife guide. Most of these have grown up within the parks and have a great knowledge of the wildlife and superb spotting skills, making finding the animals easier.

The vehicle doubles up as your hide and makes it easier to get closer to the animals and birds. I always try to stay in a location for several days rather than rushing from park to park as you then get the best opportunities to see what the parks have to offer.

The subjects vary a lot in size ranging from small birds up to the larger subjects such as elephants and buffalo.

Some of the favourites are the big cats, these are relatively large in size and often far from timid and so getting good images is reasonably simple.



I have a real soft spot for the elephants, who are great characters and very difficult to photograph in captivity.



The buffalos can be challenging to photograph due to their very dark colour.



Sometimes a bit of the landscape in the image helps to place where the animal lives.

Photographing on Safari trips



If going on safaris, research the options carefully, finding out if the trip is designed to maximise the photographic opportunities, the number of people in a vehicle, the type of vehicle (open sides are better by far than windows) and the parks that you are visiting and their rules.

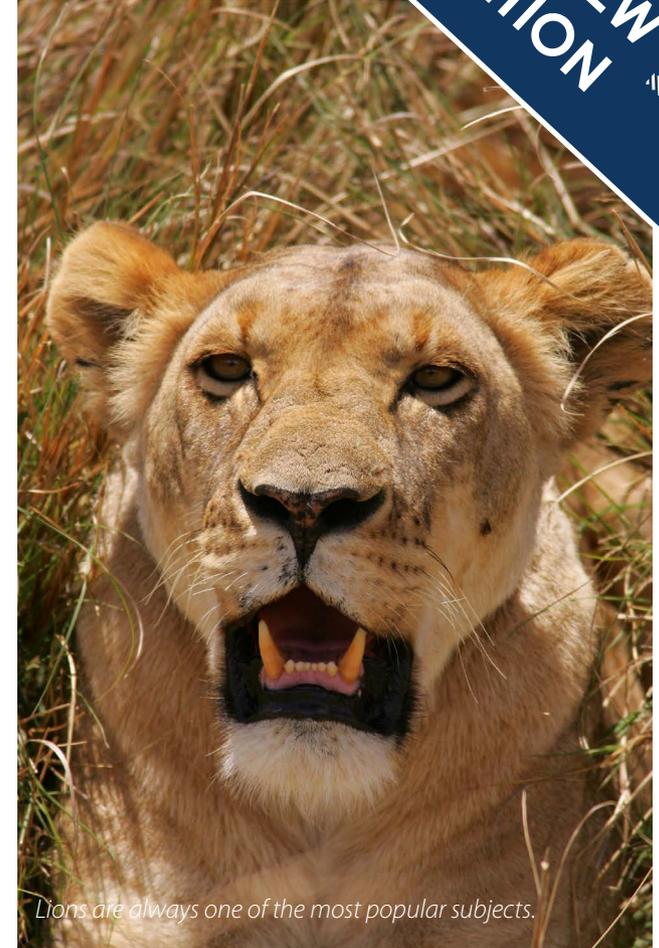
A lot of the parks allow off road driving and so you can normally get reasonably close to your



subject making the photography much easier.

Others you have to shoot from the nearest track and for these parks ultra telephoto lenses can be essential to get good images. Also research the time of year.

Most parks are at their best for just a few months of the year, at other times the animals may be



scarce or even non existent due the conditions within that area.

Remember that the hot, dry and wet periods of the year are much more extreme than we experience in the UK.

These images are all taken in the Masai Mara in Kenya on trips during October.

Shooting in the wild

If you are just going out by yourself to find the wildlife then you will need a good knowledge of the wildlife and their habits.

Often when animals have young they are much more visible as the need to find food forces them out for more of the day.

You are going to need some fairly long lenses, 400mm and above are normal and accept that the outfit is going to be heavy to carry.

Patience is going to be needed and there will be days when you may well not find anything to shoot. It is very difficult to get dramatic close up shots in the wild.

Nature reserves can provide a better chance of seeing your subjects, but getting close can give big problems, especially in the UK where we use a lot of hides which are often in less than ideal positions for photography.

There are some great locations, like the Farne Islands, where getting close is not a problem, when of course the boats to the islands are actually running.

As you get to the remoter parts of the UK and Europe the wildlife does become more accessible and easier to track down and photograph, however patience is still essential.

As we travel further afield the wildlife becomes more abundant and easier to see. Places like Galápagos, the high Arctic and Antarctica are a paradise for the wildlife photographer as access to the animals is excellent and shooting options are so good.



Herons near to cities are becoming increasingly tame and easier to photograph.



This pony was on the Isle of Harris in Scotland.



One of the most familiar birds that we see in our gardens.

General considerations

Think about what type of wildlife images you want and what animals you are keen to capture; this will shape the outfit that you need.

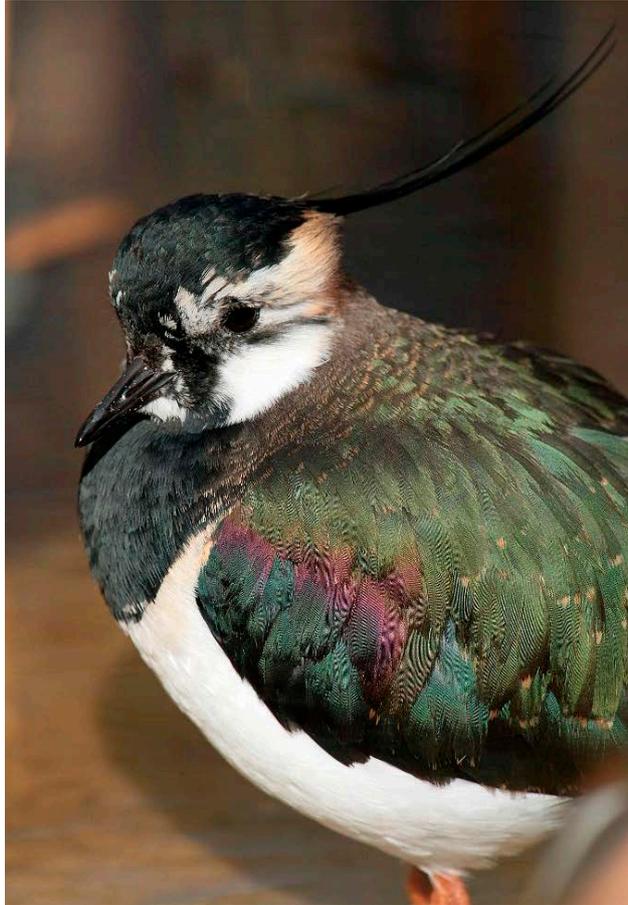
Also consider when you will be shooting. If shooting in captivity then you will be able to choose the days you shoot on and you will be taking the images in the brightest part of the day.

If shooting in the wild then you may be shooting at dawn and dusk, as that is when the animals are active.

If this is the case you need to think quite carefully about the light levels you are shooting in and plan the equipment around the restrictions that places on you.

If travelling abroad then the weight restrictions may also shape the outfit that you choose as it has to fit in with airlines increasingly tight baggage regulations.

We will look more at the equipment requirements and what is ideally needed in the next chapter.





Taken at Lake Nakuru these lizards live in
This was taken with a 300mm f2.8 L IS USM
extender to give the range that I needed.

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*Taken in summer in the UK, this damselfly was taken
to get the shot. Taken with a 400mm lens fitted with a
tube in order to get close enough.*



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