



Picturing wildlife

“Don’t just take portraits of animals. Wait long enough and they will do something interesting.”

I often recall this advice given to me many years ago by a ranger-cum-wildlife-photographer. In today’s digital age, as opposed to yesteryear when we had to use our film rather sparingly, we are able to keep on shooting until we get that one very special and unique image.

Camera and lenses

My camera bag contains a 12.5 megapixel digital camera with a 300 and 400 mm zoom lens, a wide angle and a macro lens, and a few 8 Gigabyte flashcards. I have my personal preference but any one of a number of leading camera manufacturers is capable of providing enthusiasts with the right equipment. Keep in mind that once you have settled on a specific brand you are obliged to stick with it as lenses are rarely interchangeable. When buying your lenses go for as low an f-stop (aperture) as your finances allow. Even though the price escalates as you go to larger f-stops it is worth the money when shooting at dawn or dusk and, especially, in rain forests where flash photography of chimpanzees and gorillas is not allowed.

Travel gear

Camera bags come in a whole array of designs. I prefer a backpack for several reasons. Unzipping the cover allows for easy access and while traveling it leaves your hands free to carry or pull your other luggage.



Time of day

The best time for wildlife photography is in the earlier part of the morning and towards late afternoon. The first two hours of sunlight following dawn, and the last two hours before sunset, offer soft golden light that will make your pictures positively glow. But not only is the light at its best. The animal world is also alive and active. Midday is siesta time.

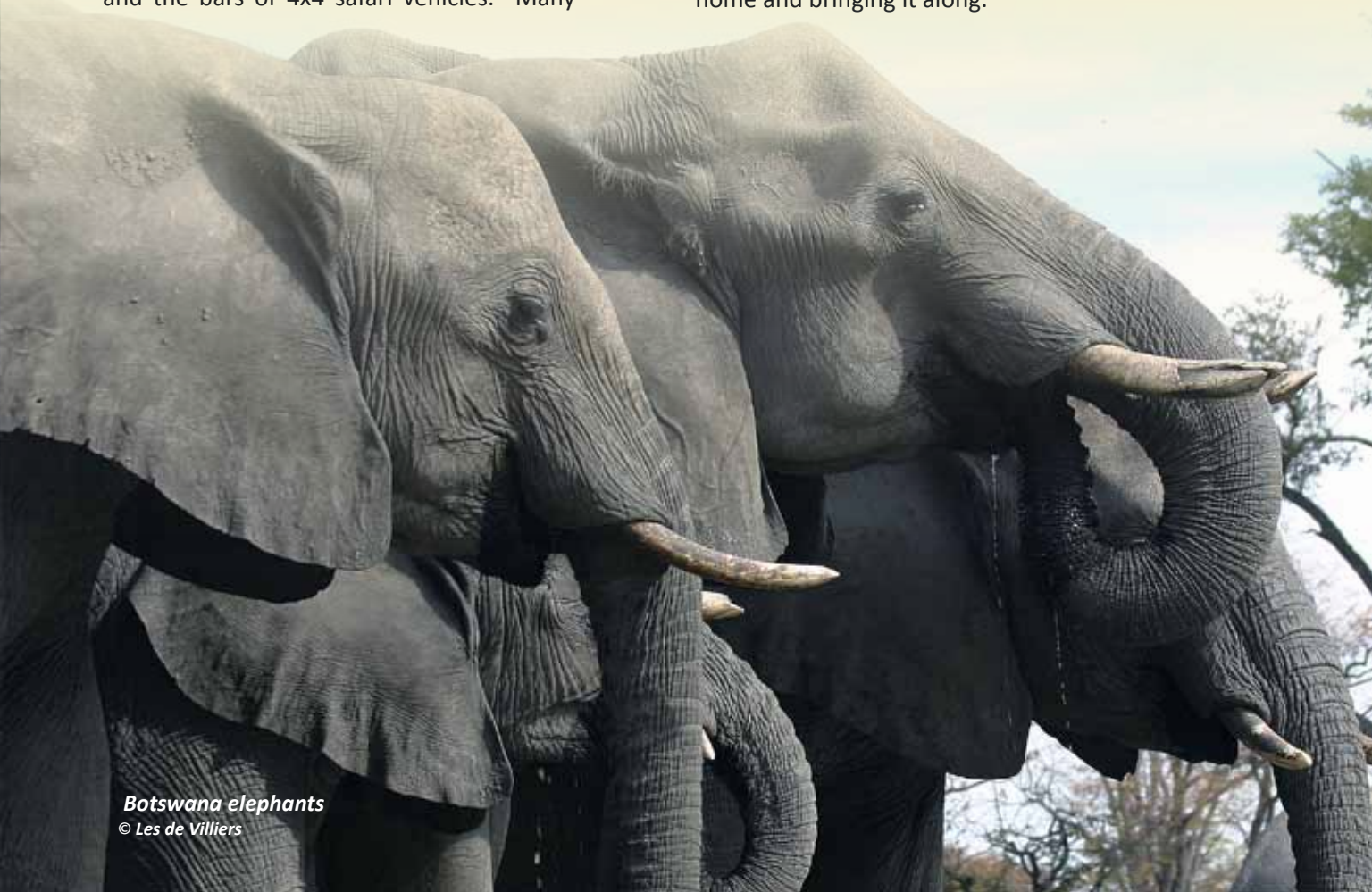
Keep it steady

I find it prudent to take along a retractable monopod that can easily be stored in my carry-on bag. A tripod is impractical while riding around in a vehicle with other guests. Top-notch game lodges provide clients with bean bags for use with long lenses. For those who want to have rock steady support while using long lenses and do not mind to carry extra weight there are clamps available that fit onto windows and the bars of 4x4 safari vehicles. Many

lenses are equipped with image stabilizers to ensure relatively sharp images in handheld situations. This allows you to move from subject to subject without restriction. Keep in mind that following lions or wild dogs on the hunt in a fast-moving vehicle hardly affords you the luxury of bean bags, clamps or monopods. You need to have free movement and a reasonably steady hand.

Point-and-shoot

This all may sound too technical for those who simply want to relive the trip and show pictures to friends and family. While any point-and-shoot camera will fill this need it is important to keep in mind that good wildlife pictures (even in areas where guests are taken off-road within close proximity of the animals) require at least a 200 mm zoom lens. Those who still insist on using film—there actually are professional photographers who prefer to record on celluloid in the belief that it affords them better color rendition—will find supplies at most game lodges. However, if you want special film you are better off buying at home and bringing it along.



Storage

You can take along a laptop computer or a Netbook to download the catch of the day and clear your flashcards—in my case often more than 500 images—and sort through them on a purely provisional basis. It is, however, only when I get back home to my big-screen computer and Photoshop that I make my final selections. I set my camera to shoot both in JPG and RAW and retain the latter only for images that are outstanding. Increasingly popular are compact and light hard drive card readers with capacities ranging from 40GB to 500GB. Some of these storage devices even have LCD screens to view your pictures. For the casual photographer there is another option: Many lodges offer guests the opportunity to transfer their pictures to CDs on their in-house computer.

Charging up

At most camps you will be able to charge your battery either in your own quarters or at the main lodge. The voltage is usually 220/240, which should not present a problem as today's equipment switches seamlessly between from 110 and 240. When going on a camping safari without any electricity you will

Early morning rush hour

need spare batteries and even in cases where there is power it is a good idea to take a spare, just in case.

Backup equipment

If you should upgrade your camera body, do not sell or give away the older one. I have had an occasion in the Serengeti where the shutter mechanism on my one and only camera body got stuck and only after a few hours of panic managed to fix the problem. Imagine an ardent wildlife photographer in the midst of the Great Migration without a camera! Nowadays I always take along a backup camera as insurance. It also makes it easier to use different lenses without removing and inserting them in the field, losing out on important action and exposing your camera mechanism to the elements.

Dust and elements

Not in all but in some areas dust is an issue to take into account. Avoid changing lenses when your vehicle comes to halt on a dusty trail and particles float in the air. In cases where you have to travel a considerable distance over a dusty road without having to use your equipment, place it in a plastic bag. During the rainy season water may present a problem, requiring you to protect your equipment.



In the Okavango Delta where your vehicle might get stuck in waterways, forcing you to get out and wade through water a plastic bag is equally important in case you slip and drop your equipment. (Usually thoughtful guides in this region carry a supply of garbage bags to wrap around your equipment and carry it for you).

Picture Enhancement

There are purists who consider “enhancing” or “reworking” pictures in Photoshop or other similar programs as “dishonest” and “unethical.” While I can understand the insistence on the part of some photographic competitions on receiving the original, unedited version of a digital picture, I believe that we should take full advantage of the opportunity to improve our images before we go into print or show them off to friends and family. Your camera, regardless of its megapixel rating, will produce large images in anything from 72 to 150 dpi (dots per inch). Before you go into print it is wise to reduce the size and bring the dpi up to at least 300. You may also want to sharpen the image and increase the brightness and contrast. For those who do not need the costly professional version of this program there are more applications available as part of the PC and Mac platforms. There are also third party software packages that can be downloaded at no charge. After a visit with the chimpanzees in a shady rainforest I came back with several pictures that were so dark that you could hardly recognize the subjects. (Flash photography is not allowed on these visits). With Photoshop I managed to transform them into very usable and printable pictures.



Golden rule

Regardless of what kind of equipment you have, there is one golden rule for taking memorable pictures of wildlife: *Never rush. Be patient.* Most of my special pictures that made it into print and enlargements were not taken on the fly but after sitting quietly while observing animals interacting.

This is why any guide who speeds along from one sighting to another in order to track down the Big Five in record time gets a C-minus in my book. In their defense it should be noted that they are usually simply trying to meet the expectations of their guests who have been promised by a travel agent or a lodge owner that they “will see the Big Five.” (These are the five animals said to have been listed by hunters as the “most dangerous.” They are elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhinoceros).

I always caution first-timers not too get to hung up on this fanciful idea of the Big Five. After all,





A leopard in any pose is magnificent photographic material

the hippo that is responsible for most human deaths in Africa is not even on the list. Incidentally, these vegetarian semi-amphibians don't snap their victims in half for fun or feast. It is merely a defensive response to finding an unfortunate lost soul unwittingly blocking their narrow pathways back to the water after a night out grazing in the fields.

Total experience

When you set out on a safari in Africa it is not only a matter of photographing the Big Five and other magnificent creatures. It is the total experience—the scenery, thunderstorms, rainbows, sunsets, desert, plains, bushveld, forests and all the fascinating creatures that live there—ranging from elephants to

smallest of insects. That is why I take along a wide angle and a macro lens, as well. The first is for all those magnificent vistas and sunsets peculiar to Africa and the second is to get close-up pictures of the fascinating little creatures and critters that inhabit the African plains and bushveld. Let's not forget that those fascinating mounds that serve as homes and lookout posts for a whole range of creatures ranging from aardvark to zebra are the work of tiny termites. Some of my best pictures included termite hills, either as centerpieces or props.

Unexpected results

Sometimes routine pictures turn out to be quite unusual as a result of unexpected and



The birds and the bees

surprising events. There are times when I set out to get a specific picture and ended up with something totally different and much more exciting and unique. While I was snapping away at an ostrich mother with her chicks in tow she suddenly felt the urge to relieve herself. The result was a picture of her spurting an arc of water over her off-spring. On another occasion I was photographing a hyperactive couple of little bee-eaters during the brief interlude when they posed together a dry tree stump. (Bee-eaters are as busy as the bees that they eat). Only after I transferred the picture to my computer and looked at it on the bigger screen did I realize that they actually had two bees flying over their heads when the picture was taken.

Good guides

The value of expert guides in the wild is their knowledge of animals and their habits. Not only do they know where to find animals but they can, with reasonable accuracy, predict their next move. Some-

times rangers also happen to be ardent photographers and able not only of placing you in a position to get the best picture but to give you technical advice on aperture and shutter speed settings. For the most part, however, the guide has done his or her duty by bringing you within reasonable distance of the animals. After that it is up to you to make the best of the occasion. They will oblige by moving around the vehicle or, during walks, accompanying you as close as possible to your subjects—always, of course, watching out for your safety and well-being.

Waterholes

Sometimes spending time at waterholes can be quite rewarding. Some of my best pictures were taken while observing animals as they come to quench their thirst. Once again the clear lesson is to be patient and to let nature and its fascinating creatures act it out with you as an unobtrusive observer. At one camp an enterprising lodge owner actually constructed an underground “hide” or bunker with a slit window at water level. Every

Unexpected consequences



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The one that did not get away

day hundreds of elephants frequent this water hole, apparently unaware of the human “moles” below. Observing these giant creatures from ground level at close range as they splurge in the water is an unforgettable experience. Needless to say, this was one occasion where I ended up with more than a hundred outstanding pictures.

Scenery

Do not get so fixated on the animals that you ignore the scenery. Safari country in Africa covers a whole range of fascinating terrain—varying from the sand dunes to floodplains, from savannah to bushveld and rain forests. There are the baobab, the fever and the sausage tree, welwitschia and a wealth of other exotic trees and shrubs ready to be photographed as a backdrop and on their own. African sunsets are the world’s most spectacular.

Going for the kill

After the quest for the Big Five the other most frequent request on the part of safarists is to see a kill. Witnessing a lion kill in broad daylight is an unusual occurrence. They usually hunt at night and their average success rate is a mere 30 percent. It is more likely to see wild dogs rip apart their prey as they are very efficient with an 80 percent success rate. But you have to be fast in following them and taking your pictures because they finish their feast within a matter of minutes. Unfortunately these fierce hunters are a diminishing species .

Expectations

Do not set out on your African safari with expectations of coming back with images like those displayed on *National Geographic* and on *Discovery*

Channel. Those are the results of many months (even years) of living, eating and sleeping in the wild, involving teams of professionals. But you will be rewarded—as long as you keep your eyes open and your camera ready—with pictures that will impress the folks back home. Even if they are not reprinted in major magazines, they will represent special memories of a trip of a lifetime.

Sorting and saving

I advise against discarding images too quickly. In this digital age where we shoot a whole series of pictures without worrying about additional cost, one often ends up with numerous almost identical shots. When you examine these images on your computer screen for the first time it is wise to simply throw out the fuzzy and totally unusable ones. Keep the rest on file for a while and re-examine them before you cull any further. Ever so often I find myself going back to images that I passed over in my initial selection process. On a second, closer examination I find something special and appealing in their composition and coloring that made them stand out above my initial first choices. With external storage disks up to a terabyte at reasonable cost there is no need to conserve space any longer. The only real problem is to devise a system of filing and sorting that would make it easy to locate specific images for future use. There are a number of programs on the market to assist—some on a free download basis.

The Making of a Cover Picture

Digital photography gives us the freedom to shoot-at-will and sort out the best from many sequences afterwards. In this sequence I started off with a rather sanguine, sleepy female lion guarding her off-spring. There was nothing more in it than just another portrait of a lion until her tongue appeared—a sure signal of a yawn to follow. (Perhaps she was as bored with me as an onlooker as I was with her lifeless pose).

I shot pictures intermittently and frequently and had about fifty to review when I got back to the camp.

My final choice was number 5 which made it to the cover of a publication but I have to admit that I was very partial to the grimace or grin in number 6 that punctuated the whole yawning exercise.

The motto of the story is: Never be in a rush to move on to other sights. Spend time with the animals and allow them to “do their own thing.” Even if you do not have the slightest interest in photography you will find it most rewarding.

That is what safaris are all about: Getting an unobstructed view of wild creatures in their natural habitat, doing what comes naturally.

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