

Module # 2 – Component # 3

Side and subdued lighting

Side lighting

There is not a lot to be said in this section - side lighting is "halfway" between front and back lighting, so it combines characteristics of both.

This lighting style tends to **show off texture and contours well**, so it is the lighting style of primary choice amongst landscape photographers. However, in wildlife, side-lighting is rarely ideal. Nevertheless, we often have to take what we are given, so how do we best use side-lighting?

I have chosen a photograph of two young lions romping around. These cavorting activities can last minutes and because the animals circle each other, the lighting angle changes frequently.



Although I was photographing on a sunny day, there was a good spread of clouds in the sky, so there was good shadow detail. Of all of the photographs I took of this scene, this was the most effective - where one animal was looking into the sun.

As a rule, if you have to use side lighting, choose a pose where your subject is looking into the sun. It invariably shows off the face (and especially the eyes, but in this case, also the expression and aggression) particularly well.

Subdued lighting

The two most common forms of subdued lighting are cloudy days and shade. The lighting qualities are much the same, although shadows tend to have a slightly bluish (unpleasant) colour cast, which is not really a problem, as it is easily corrected in post-processing. Shadows can also be dappled, so watch out for blotches of sunlight. Subdued light is characterized by having an "even" look, devoid of lighting direction. This results in pictures having a "flat" look to them.

Flat-looking pictures are not generally desirable in wildlife. When your lighting has some obvious direction to it, it adds relief and a 3-D effect to an otherwise 2-D photo, so cloudy days rarely yield your best shots of the trip. There is one big advantage of cloud cover - the light never gets harsh, and you can shoot all day without worrying about the unpleasant midday sun.

I have chosen a number of photographs to show you the effective use of this lighting condition.

The first photo I have chosen is of four **green pigeons** in a tree. When I first learned about green pigeons - with brightly coloured beaks, blue eyes and green plumage, I found it hard to believe that they are so difficult to spot in the wild. This photograph shows you why - they blend into their surroundings so unbelievably well! This photo is entirely about blending and camouflage – notice that the "flat" lighting is an integral ingredient to that effect.





Now, look at the photo of the jumping impala. Notice once again, the flat look that is devoid of texture and relief. It is not a problem in this photo for two reasons - first, the careful use of a wide aperture to throw the background slightly out of focus has given this shot some relief, and the jumping action of the animal has added some life.



Subdued lighting has worked very well with this ant-eating chat. It gives the picture a limited tonal range, showing just how well-camouflaged the bird is.

The flat lighting once again enhances the "blending" of tones - an effect that would have been entirely lost if there were strong shadows in the picture.

Selective focusing techniques are used to make the bird stand out, enhancing visibility, without losing the sense of camouflage.



This photograph of a ground scraper thrush uses similar lighting and focus techniques as the previous photo, but to a very different end. Here, I emphasize contrast, not subdue it. Both the speckled plumage of the bird and the colour contrast give this photo impact – despite the flat lighting.



Subdued lighting invariably works well with small animals of any type, including mice and small birds like this wagtail.



The soft nature of the light suits their delicacy. Notice how the soft lighting also suits the delicate structure of the butterfly below.

Having said that subdued lighting works well with delicate animals, you would hardly describe a pelican as delicate in the same way as the wagtail above! Yet, it does have very delicate colours. These whites, pinks and soft yellows all show up well in subdued light.





Unlike the pelican, these cosmos flowers have quite vivid colours. However, they have a delicate texture which is shown off by the soft lighting.



Soft lighting invokes the mood of rain and wetness and is therefore the lighting style of choice with the elephant above, where it adds to the "wetness" of the scene.



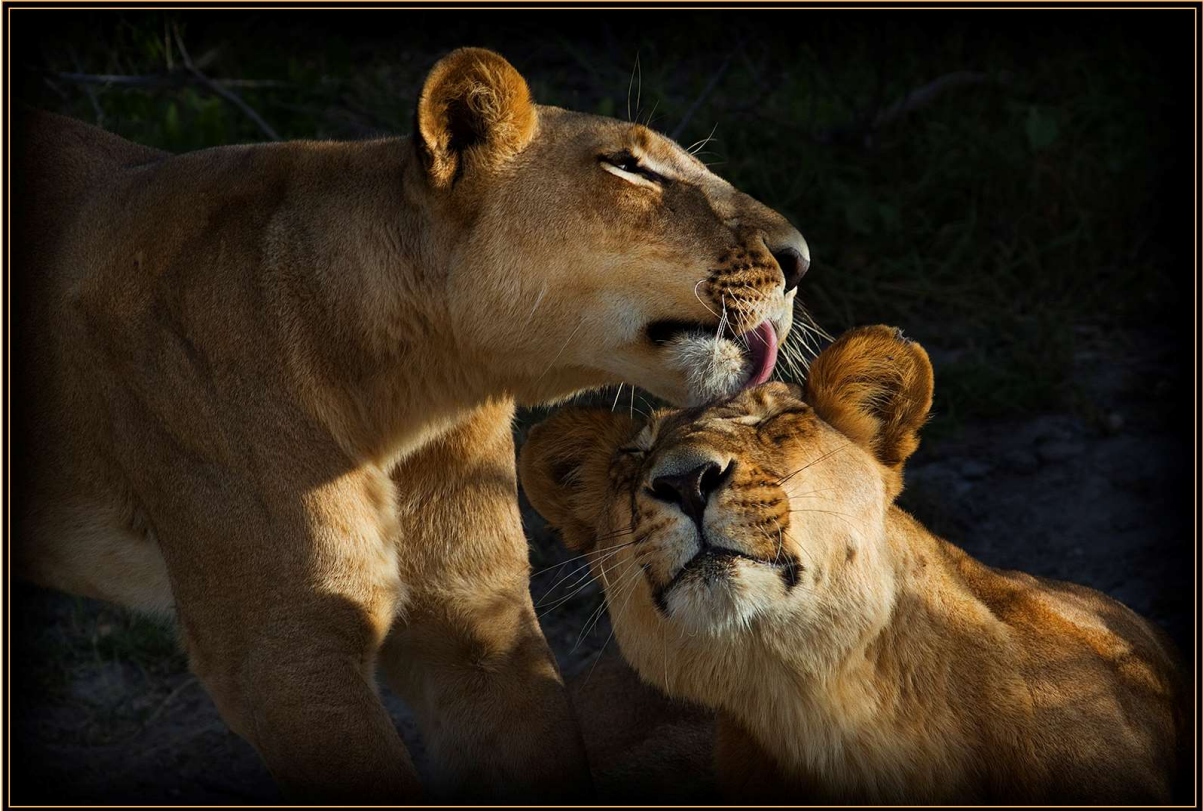
Thick-billed weavers are difficult to photograph in their habitat - the spiky nature of the reeds where they live gives the photograph an ugly, untidy appearance. Here, I used soft lighting to tone down the reeds - they are still quite discernible but are not distracting.



It can be very hard to get detail under the wings of birds in flight - particularly with dark birds, like these shovelers. A good covering of clouds subdued the shadows enough to give me enough detail in the shadows.



Certain animals - like the vulture above - are most active at midday, when the sun is usually harsh. These animals photograph well in subdued light.



Although the lighting here is direct, the sun is very low in the sky and the lighting is soft. The soft lighting here gives the lions a cuddly appearance, which suits the pose immensely well.

Conclusion

Although it is helpful to "compartmentalise" lighting conditions as I have done in this module, it is equally important to realise that there are many overlaps and intermediate states.

I chose this photograph of flamingos to conclude this topic. It was a thick, overcast day and I noticed four flamingos fly into a patch of subdued sunlight, offsetting them beautifully against the cloudy mountains. The resulting photograph is dramatic in its own sense, yet it does not fit comfortably into any of the categories above.



The moral of the story here is to "think about light". The easiest way to understand how to use it effectively is to compartmentalise its characteristics, but the overall objective is to heighten your sensitivity to light and learn to use it effectively.