Module # 6 – Component # 1

In association with Daryl Balfour &

50 Photo Tips for SLR Cameras

Preface

This course was written by world-renowned wildlife photographer Daryl Balfour, and has been the basis for a regular feature published in Africa Geographic. This is the first time his material has been available over the Internet, and in course form. In addition to the invaluable insights and tips on a vast range of topics, this course is filled with hundreds of examples of his own work demonstrating various techniques, common mistakes and moments of brilliance. Each Component also includes a quick self-assessment.

Introduction

This Module consists of a single component which gives Daryl's top 50 tips for wildlife photography. It is a very handy guide to print out and keep in your camera bag, giving the basic rules of thumb so that you don't have to carry the entire course with you at all times.

The Top 50 Tips

Equipment

- Use a 35mm SLR - **single lens reflex** - camera with a **selection of interchangeable lenses**. Great as they are, point and shoot cameras just won't do if you hope to take good wildlife images. You'll need a lens of at **least 300mm**, which gives a **6x magnification**. Modern autofocus cameras are a great aid, but aren't essential. And study the manual that comes with new equipment - you'll be amazed at how much you can learn!

- Use a **tripod, monopod, beanbag or similar camera support**. The most common cause of blurred images is camera shake/movement. A quality tripod is an essential accessory, particularly when using the longer telephoto lenses required for successful wildlife photography.

- When buying a tripod remember you get what you pay for. **Quality is expensive**. Look for one that has **rigid legs** and **does not wobble or vibrate too easily**. Ignore gimmicky features such as geared centre columns and try not to extend the legs to their maximum every time you use the tripod - it makes them **less stable**. Some top tripod brands are Gitzo, Manfrotto and Benbo.

- Find a **tripod head** that suits you then use it a lot so you become familiar with its controls. Many pro's prefer **ball heads** for their ease of operation. Buy the **best you can afford** and make sure it has a **smooth action and locks in position** securely.

- **Don't be a slave to technology**, you don't need every new gadget on the market...there's an expensive disease called 'Lens Lust'. Some of the world's greatest photographs have been taken with simple, basic manual cameras and a 50mm standard lens. But do buy the best you can afford, especially when purchasing lenses. Rather **spend less on the body and more on the lens** than get the best camera and a no-name-brand piece of glass (or plastic).

- **Carry spare batteries**. Lots of them. Most modern cameras won't work at all without power - and spares are usually impossible to find once away from the cities.

- **Protect your lenses with a simple UV or Skylight filter**. These are almost clear and have an imperceptible effect on the image but can prevent scratches to the front elements of your expensive lenses. **Replace filters once they become scratched and degraded.**

- Don't put cheap filters on the ends of expensive lenses - they can ruin your image quality. Some may even prevent proper focussing. The best filters are usually those made by the actual camera and lens manufacturers, or better brands such as B+W, Singh-Ray, Tiffen or Hoya.

- **Learn to use filters, but use them sparingly**. If it is obvious you've used a filter, usually it is because you have used it poorly or incorrectly. A few filters you should have in your equipment bag include a **polariser** (circular polariser if using autofocus lenses), **graduated neutral density** and perhaps a **slight warming filter** such as an 81A, which is useful when shooting in shade, under heavily overcast skies, or with electronic flash.

- **Polarising filters are multi-dimensional accessories**. They can be used to **deepen** the blue of skies, **enhance** the white of clouds, **cut reflections** off glass or water, and **bring out colour** by eliminating reflections off surfaces, particularly with foliage. Don't put it away just because the sun isn't shining or the sky isn't blue!

- It is more economical to buy filters (apart from the Skylight or UV filter which you fit and leave on each lens as protection) in the thread size to f**it your largest lens**, then simply buy **step-up rings** that allow you to adapt them for use on other lenses with a smaller front diameter.

- While a Canon or Nikon 600mm f4 lens might be your dream acquisition, you don't have to have one to take great shots. A 300mm f2,8 with a **matched 2x converter** will give you a 600mm f5,6 lens at a **fraction of the price** (if you already have the 300!) but in any case makes a more practical outfit for most photographers. Even a quality 300mm f4 with a doubler will give you the same reach and acceptable image quality most of the time. I find a 500mm f4 to be less cumbersome and unwieldy than a 600, much lighter…and it is cheaper too! **Quality teleconverters in 1,4x and 2x power are invaluable accessories**, but should only be used with high quality lenses.

- **Know and understand your equipment and film**. When your once-in-a-lifetime subject is in front of you is no time to be trying to figure out how your camera works. **Keep the camera manual in your equipment bag**.

Film

- **Slide (or transparency) film is less tolerant of exposure miscalculations** than print film, but is generally able to **reproduce colours with more vibrancy** that print film and is still the medium of choice if you hope to sell, publish or enter competitions with your images. Low ASA (slow speed) slide films such as Fuji Velvia 50 ASA, Kodachrome 64 ASA, and an array of 100 ASA films from either Fuji or Kodak are the choice of probably 99 percent of the world's professional wildlife photographers.

- **Faster films** (higher ASA) tend to have **more grain** and produce images that are less colour saturated and less sharp than the slower films, but sometimes it is virtually impossible to use a slow film because of low light levels or rapid subject movement, or a combination of both. Use faster films only when you can't get away with using a lower ASA rating.

- **Adopt a film and use it most of the time**, learning its characteristics under different light conditions. But **experiment** with others from time to time - not on an important shoot though - so you can compare your results. You'll probably settle on two or three that you can use in varying conditions.

- Film is the **cheapest component of your photography** - **shoot lots of it**. That's usually cheaper than having to go back for more. And take **lots of film when you go on a photo safari** - there's nothing more frustrating than running out at a once-in-a-lifetime moment, and it is often impossible to buy more in remote areas of Africa.

- When using **colour print film** you should set your e**xposures based upon a reading off the shadows or darkest part of the composition**. With **slide** (transparency) film you need to **expose for the most important highlights**.

Flash

- **Flash is not something to be used only in the dark**. Use it to add a sparkle or a catch-light to eyes, particularly with birds, and to fill-in areas of shadow or counter strong backlighting likely to overpower your subject and cast it into silhouette. Flash can also be used to **intensify colours**, such as in a bird's plumage. Experiment with slightly under-exposing the background and bumping up the flash exposure slightly.

- If you are planning to do much flash photography try to get hold of a **flash-intensifying device such as the Lepp Project-a-Flash** that slips over the head of your flash unit, **concentrating and projecting the beam of light** for use with **longer lenses at greater range**. A flash used outdoors loses about two f-stops of range compared with indoors where ceilings and walls serve to reflect light.

- When photographing **wildlife at night under-expose the flash slightly**, as much as two-thirds of a stop, to **create a dark, nocturnal feel** to the image. Nighttime photographs with full-strength flash look glaringly artificial and overly bright.

- Try to **hold your flash off camera** (use a TTL extension sync cord to do this) and a bit to the side (at least 25cm from the lens axis) in order to **eliminate reflections** or "eye-shine" when photographing wildlife.

- For **daylight fill-in** I find by setting the flash output to **under-expose by 1,3 - 1,7 stops** the most natural looking results are obtained. Read your flash meter's manual to determine how to do this. The use of daylight fill-flash is one of the most valuable techniques you can master.

Light

- The **Sunny Sixteen rule** is one of the basic photographic **'rules of thumb'** - on a clear, sunny day once the sun has risen properly a correct exposure will be equivalent to an **aperture of f16 at a speed equal to the reciprocal of your film's ASA (i.e. 1/ASA)**. Thus if you are using 100 ASA film on a clear sunny day a correct exposure will be f16 at 1/100 (the nearest on most cameras is 1/125) or equivalent, e.g. f11 at 1/250, f8 at 1/500 etc. Use this as a basis for all sunlit exposure calculations, referring mentally to it to corroborate what your light-meter indicates.

- **Reflective light-meters** (such as in most cameras) are calibrated to read the amount of light **reflected off a medium toned (18 percent grey) subject**. If you leave your camera's meter to set exposures for a predominantly white scene or subject the camera will interpret it as a medium grey and expose it as such. Likewise a black subject will be rendered grey. You need to **compensate exposure settings** for scenes that are not average toned overall. Learn how to use those Plus (+) and Minus (-) settings on your camera!

- **Wake up early!** The **best light** for wildlife photography is usually the **first two hours around dawn and again around sunset** - the so-called "golden hours" when the sun's rays are a warm golden tone. Never mind missing your sleep - you get to take long siestas!

- **Great light makes great images**. A mundane subject in great light will make a far better photograph than a great subject in mundane light. Learn to 'see' the light, and to make it work for you.

- **Avoid becoming one-dimensional**. Photograph in **all types of light** and make it work by being creative. Even in midday, if you find a high vantage point and shoot downwards you can get excellent results.

- **Learn to use your camera's spotmeter** if it has one. It is a valuable aid to correct exposures, particularly in tricky lighting and with subjects that are a long way off medium tone, such as pure black or white birds, or very dark animals such as buffalo, wet elephants, gorillas etc. **Pure white is about two full stops brighter than medium grey, so you would need to open up (use the Plus [+] setting) while black is about two stops darker, so you need to shut down your exposure [-] if the subject is filling your metering area.**

- **Bracket exposures**; i.e. take some shots at exposure settings slightly either side of what your meter tells you is the best exposure, or what you have calculated. You may find that you prefer the shots that are slightly under or over exposed when viewed on a light table later.

- To shoot **sunsets** take an exposure **reading off the sky away to the side of the sun**, without including the sun in the composition. Lock in this exposure setting (using the AE-Exposure Lock feature if your camera has one, or by using the Manual exposure controls) then recompose your shot to include the sun (or brightest area of the sky). If you don't do this you will end up with a dark, under-exposed image.

Technique

- **Patience is the key to getting the best shots**, though a good dose of luck doesn't hurt either. When you find a good subject it pays to spend time with it, waiting for the perfect moment. **Stay with an animal, getting to know its routine and movements**, and also letting it get to know you and relax a little. Persevere with it and wait for the right moment for the best shot, rather than click off a few frames and go rushing off with a "Next…?" mentality.

- A **photograph is a brief moment of time and light** - adopt the Boy Scout's motto: **be prepared**! A pillowcase or even a towel draped over your camera, at the ready on the car-seat alongside you while driving around the game reserve, means it is accessible for quick action when required.

- **Experiment**. You'll never make progress if you don't try new things. **Keep a notebook in which you keep track of your experimentation**, and the results. Make a section of it where you can keep a **list of handy tips, reminders and ideas** to refer to in the field. Make a list of **Do's and Don'ts** and use it to prick your memory.

- Find a **laboratory that gives you good service** when developing your films and commit to them. By getting a different lab to process your films every shoot you are likely to get inconsistent results.

- **Review your images thoroughly**, preferably with a good viewing loupe (magnifier) on a colour corrected light table if shooting slide film. **Be critical and learn from your mistakes as well as your successes.**

- **Read the photographic magazines** - they'll help you keep in touch with developments in technique and technology that may enhance your craft. And **study the images of the professionals and your peers**. Decide what makes them successful, why you like them (or dislike them) and learn from them.

- For **maximum depth of field use small apertures like f16** and **set your point of focus one third of the way into the scene** (i.e. one third up from the bottom of the frame). Use the depth of field preview feature if your camera has one.

- **Be aware of heat haze and shimmer on hot days**, particularly when using long lenses. Telephoto lenses compress atmospheric haze and result in blurry, un-sharp images. Once the sun rises more than about 30 degrees above the horizon and the earth starts to warm up heat shimmer can become pronounced. Try to move closer to your subjects and use a shorter lens when this occurs.

- Use **different shutter speeds for different effects**. A slow speed (1/15th or slower) in the rain, for example, will record the rain as visible streaks. A herd of elephants at a waterhole at dusk, when the light is too low for an exposure that will freeze their movements, can be rendered in an impressionistic blur with a deliberately slower shutter speed. **Ensure the camera itself stays absolutely still** though…or pan along with the animal's movement for a different result.

The Subject

- **Know something about your subject** - spend time with it, learn its ways, read as much as you can about it beforehand, and talk to people - or spend time with them in the field - with knowledge and experience of whatever you hope to photograph.

- **Photograph what really interests you**, not just anything because it is there. Let your passion for the subject shine through in your images.

- **Don't let rainy weather put you off**. Animals tend to be **quite active, even frisky, in the rain** and the **soft muted colours** are rendered wonderfully by films such as Fuji Velvia and Kodak E100VS. If you see a storm brewing take your camera and get out there - **dark thunderheads can enhance a landscape** with a wonderful mood and sense of foreboding. **Keep your camera dry with a simple plastic bag, secured over the lens hood with an elastic band if need be.**

Composition

- **Remember the basic rules of composition**. The **'Rule of Thirds'** is just one of them…don't place horizons through the centre of the frame, rather a third up from the bottom or down from the top. Try not to place your subjects dead centre, but rather off to one side of the image frame.

- Rules are made to be learnt - and then **broken sometimes**. Don't be a slave to them…use them to your advantage. Composition should become intuitive.

- **Use colour, shape and form as an integral part of your image composition**. Look for patterns in your composition, either features of the landscape, interesting trees, groups within herds of animals, or in the sky. Use them to enhance your images.

- Learn to **mentally compose** so you instinctively know how different focal length lenses will frame a subject, **eliminating the need to fiddle** with each one deciding which lens is best for a particular shot.

- **Vary your position and perspective**. By shifting just a few metres left or right, or even a few feet up or down, you might be able to get an entirely different angle and make a better photograph.

- **Use different lenses to vary composition and perspective**. Don't get carried away shooting only tightly framed portraits of everything. Zoom out, or change to a shorter lens, and include some of the animal's environment or habitat.

- Before squeezing the shutter release and taking your photograph, **take a quick look around the edges of the frame** to ensure you haven't let a stray branch protrude distractingly, or that you haven't chopped your subject's feet off. Take the shot, but then ask yourself how you can make it better and take some more.

HANDY EXPOSURE COMPENSATION GUIDE

The following are exposure settings I find work for me. These are based upon readings taken off a front-lit subject using a spot meter. Try them and adjust according to your likes and results.

White - such as egret or penguin feathers, white paint or paper, fresh snow: open up +1,5 stops.

Off-White/Light Grey

- beach sand, pale fur or feathers, pale grey sky, dry cement, light toned wood: open up +1 stop.

Medium Grey /Deep Blue

- such as tanned Caucasian skin, weathered wood or bark, mid-toned animal hide (impala, lion etc), mid-toned green foliage: no compensation needed.

Dark Grey/Brown - dark green

leaves, female buffalo, dark brown feathers, elephant: shut down -0,7 to -1 stops.

Black

- dark forest, wet slate, wet elephants, black feathers, black fur: shut down -1,3 to -2 stops.

These are guidelines. It is wise to bracket when exposure compensation is called from - at the very least by bracketing you will have a selection of exposures from which to choose. Try to bracket by either one third or half a stop on either side of the calculated exposure. Make a note of what you do and the results you obtain – eventually it will become second nature. While driving around test yourself on things you see: ask yourself how you would expose certain objects, is that medium toned, is that one stop under, and so on.

Daryl Balfour

Daryl Balfour is regarded as one of the world's leading wildlife photographers and authors, and while he specialises in African subjects he is also known for his work in a wide range of other areas. He studied zoology at university level, and later became a newspaper investigative and photo-journalist. However, in 1989 he became a full-time professional wildlife photographer, and enjoys sharing his knowledge and experience with fellow travellers. This has led to him also working as a specialist safari guide, taking VIP guests to remote regions, particularly on photo safaris.

Daryl lives with his wife Sharna in Swaziland and South Africa, but their expeditions throughout Africa and much of the rest of the world take them away from home for up to 10 months a year. These travels include trips to remote parts of Africa, Alaska, Canada and Antarctica.

A regular contributor to Africa Geographic magazine, Daryl has contributed articles on areas, plants and animals as well as specialist pieces on photographic techniques. His photographs have also appeared in publications such as National Geographic, International Wildlife, Outside, BBC Wildlife, GEO, Outdoor Photographer, Animan, Tier and Getaway.

Daryl has authored a number of best-selling coffee table books featuring his stunning photographs, including:

- Simply Safari
- African Elephants - A Celebration of Majesty
- Chobe - Africa's Untamed Wilderness
- Etosha
- This Is Botswana
- Rhino - The Story of the Rhinoceros and a Plea for its Conservation
- Okavango – An African Paradise

Both Daryl and Sharna have contributed, as principal photographers, to many other major books, including The Spectacular World of Wildlife (Reader's Digest) and Wildest Africa (New Holland). They were featured lecturers at the prestigious North American Nature Photography Association's annual summit in Las Vegas, USA in 2001.

Daryl continues to write, lecture, guide and of course photograph, and we are very proud to present his Wildlife Photography Course here on WildlifeCampus.

www.darylbalfour.com