@wildlifecampus

Digital wildlife photography

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Module # 1 – Component # 1

Wildlife specialisation

Wildlife as a photographic specialisation

Let us face it – wildlife photography is the holy grail of all photography. Photograph that fish eagle pounding his wings to lift the tigerfish it just caught in its talons. You have a picture that will captivate any audience – some will drop their jaws in wonder as to how you managed to take it, while others will revel in its timeless magnificence.

And taking photos like this is both easy and fun – but more of that later. I need to start by asking you **why** you want to take exceptional wildlife pictures, because once you understand your inner motivation, you will start to develop a style that is unique and characterful. In the same way that a good artist has a unique and individual style, so does a good photographer. Nurture your own style. Individual style is an important element of any art form, but it is an ingredient that cannot be included in any course. I can teach you technique and theory, but ultimately, your photos should reflect your unique personality. Nobody else sees the world quite as you do.

So, back to the question - why do you want to take exceptional wildlife pictures? Most people answer: "Because I want the satisfaction of achieving an exceptional shot".

That might be true when you start wildlife photography but be prepared for that viewpoint to change. As your wildlife subjects will humble you, you will learn patience. You will start to learn your proper place in relation to nature. The commonly heard adage "Do whatever it takes to get the shot" does not apply in wildlife photography. Looking after the animal, you are photographing should be a higher priority. And a more rewarding one. When you make the all-important transition of realising that the well-being of your subject is more important than your photo of it, you are truly on the road to greatness.

American wildlife photographer George Lepp puts it succinctly when he says:

"Curious Innocents energetically "interacting with nature" endanger themselves and their potential subjects and rarely bring back photographic prizes. Mother Nature may suffer fools with cameras, but she will not gladly give up her secrets to them."

Animals, even docile ones, can be deceptively fast. A perched bird, for instance, will move its head in small but rapid movements, checking for danger from all angles. This photograph demonstrates just how rapid the movement can be. The shutter speed is 1/50 second, and the sunbird has rotated its head through an astonishing quarter of a circle! Photographically speaking, this is not a good photograph, but it should alert you to the incredible speed of a wild animal and how you, as a photographer, should always be aware of that speed.

Prepare yourself instead to become part of a working, natural system, proceed methodically and thoughtfully, and exciting and rewarding photographic opportunities will reveal themselves to you.

When photographing in the wild, it is important to remember three important points:

1. Carelessness endangers your life, the life of someone else, or your animal subject. Do not stop your vehicle in a dangerous position just to get a photograph; do not go to the very edge of a slippery cliff just to get the photograph, and do not step on eggs or delicate plants to position yourself for the photograph.
2. The irresponsible behaviour of a photographer with sophisticated camera equipment reflects badly on all wildlife photographers. By showing respect for the environment, politeness to others and consideration for both, I have often found rangers and wardens to go the extra mile to help me get my photograph.
3. Your actions, no matter how sensitive, when combined with the actions of those who precede and follow you, contribute to a cumulative, detrimental effect on the environment. Tread gently, lightly and sensitively.

Enough of the philosophy. Wildlife photography is largely what *you* make of it. On the one hand, I know someone who sat in a hide for three weeks on end, 16 hours a day and only took one photograph. But it was a really great shot of a crocodile catching a warthog, and the photographer was ecstatic! On the other hand, if you want the thrill of simply taking photographs, place yourself in a target-rich environment like a swarm of birds catching insects, and you can easily click away at one pic per second for the rest of the day – every photo different from the previous one.

Both of these environments have one thing in common, though – wild animals have a timing all of their own. If you check out some of the photographs accompanying this module, you will see why I say that.

Here is a photograph of a Pied kingfisher diving to catch a fish. Within 1/100s from the time its beak hits the water, the bird is fully submerged. The photographer needs a very high shutter speed for this type of photo (I used 1/3200 s) and superb timing. This photograph does not demonstrate "superhuman reflexes" on behalf of the photographer but rather good planning. Notice that the bird is diving vertically – when kingfishers are catching fish at any appreciable depth, they ALWAYS drop vertically – this is because light bends at an air/water surface, and the bird cannot aim properly from an angle. Knowing this makes it much easier for the photographer to predict the bird's flight path in the viewfinder. Just before the bird hits the water, the photographer presses the shutter, with the camera set to high-speed rapid-fire, and hopes for the best.

The trick is NOT to press the shutter too early and thereby lose the bird completely in the viewfinder as the shutter starts to clatter away. When using motor drive, short bursts taken at the right time usually work best.

Generally speaking, wildlife photography differs from other fields of photography in the following ways:

- It needs longer focal length lenses because subjects tend to be shy and keep further away.
- It requires higher shutter speeds than you might expect, as subjects can be immensely fast.
- It taxes the autofocus system of the camera severely – not only are subjects fast, they are typically well camouflaged, stressing the autofocus system of the camera to its limit.
- It is generally most rewarding two hours after sunrise and two hours before sunset, as this is typically when animals are most active. It is also the time when sunlight is at its best.

Understanding these differences allows you to make specialist adjustments which will put you at a considerable advantage over the "general-purpose" photographer. I will expand on two here just to make my point:

In most areas of wildlife photography, using a long lens is a definite advantage – this is almost universally known in the photographic world. Yet, most photographers – experienced or otherwise – cannot consistently take sharp photos with a 400mm or longer lens. Experts estimate that 90% of photographers fit into this category, and based on my considerable field experience, I would say that this estimate is conservative. If you resolve to learn how to use your long lens properly (we will tell you how in a later module), you will already be in the top 10% of the group.

As I said above, wildlife subjects are immensely fast. How, then, do you capture the "right" moment? It has often been said that you need super-fast reflexes and super-speed equipment, but a little knowledge and technique will take you further. Since I turned 50, my reflexes have slowed considerably, and to be honest, they were never fast in the first place. But my knowledge has increased, and I am now taking better pictures than ever before because I plan them. This is the way that I plan things in my mind:

The bird at the top of that tree will take off soon. I know that because it makes all the right "signs" – like shaking its feathers and "pooping". Yes, birds often defecate before take-off – why carry extra weight that you do not need to? Birds usually take off into the wind, so check the wind to predict the action. Now, I need to plan the "flight shot" – big birds expound a lot of energy on take–off, using dramatic wing-sweeps, which make great photographs. What will this take-off be like? I already know its direction of take-off, so will the lighting be good? What will my background be? Is my distance correct? I then look ahead along the path that I know the bird will take and look for the "perfect spot" to take a pic. This spot is usually determined by optimal lighting but may also be determined by a special background.

Notice that the hard part is over before the bird has even taken off! Now I just wait for the bird to do the work, and I take the pictures I had planned and at the right time.

Now look back over the two scenarios I have covered. Can you see how this specialist knowledge can give you a considerable advantage? I hope so because the rest of this course builds on it.

Although this photograph has many appealing aspects, it fails overall because the bird is looking away. This makes the photograph uninvolving and therefore boring. Because animals – and birds especially – dart their heads around so quickly, it is often the case that the photograph you planned to take has altered substantially by the time you took the picture. This photograph illustrates that point.

This second photograph is much, much better, although it is similar in most respects to the previous one. Compare the two and notice how this photo captures the viewer's attention much better. Here, I captured the "right moment", and in the last shot, I did not. To a large extent, wildlife photography is about capturing the right moment. You should always try to do so – it is a major factor in differentiating the good wildlife photographer from the technically-competent all-round photographer. Because birds move so quickly and randomly, you need to develop a good technique to catch the right moment. That is surprisingly easy to do when you study your subject diligently. Although birds move their heads rapidly, they always pause after doing so to assess the threat potential. I waited for this bird to engage my stare, and as soon as eye contact was established, I took the shot – before the bird looked elsewhere. I was ready and waiting – camera properly focused, perfectly still and with finger on the trigger – waiting for the precise look I wanted.

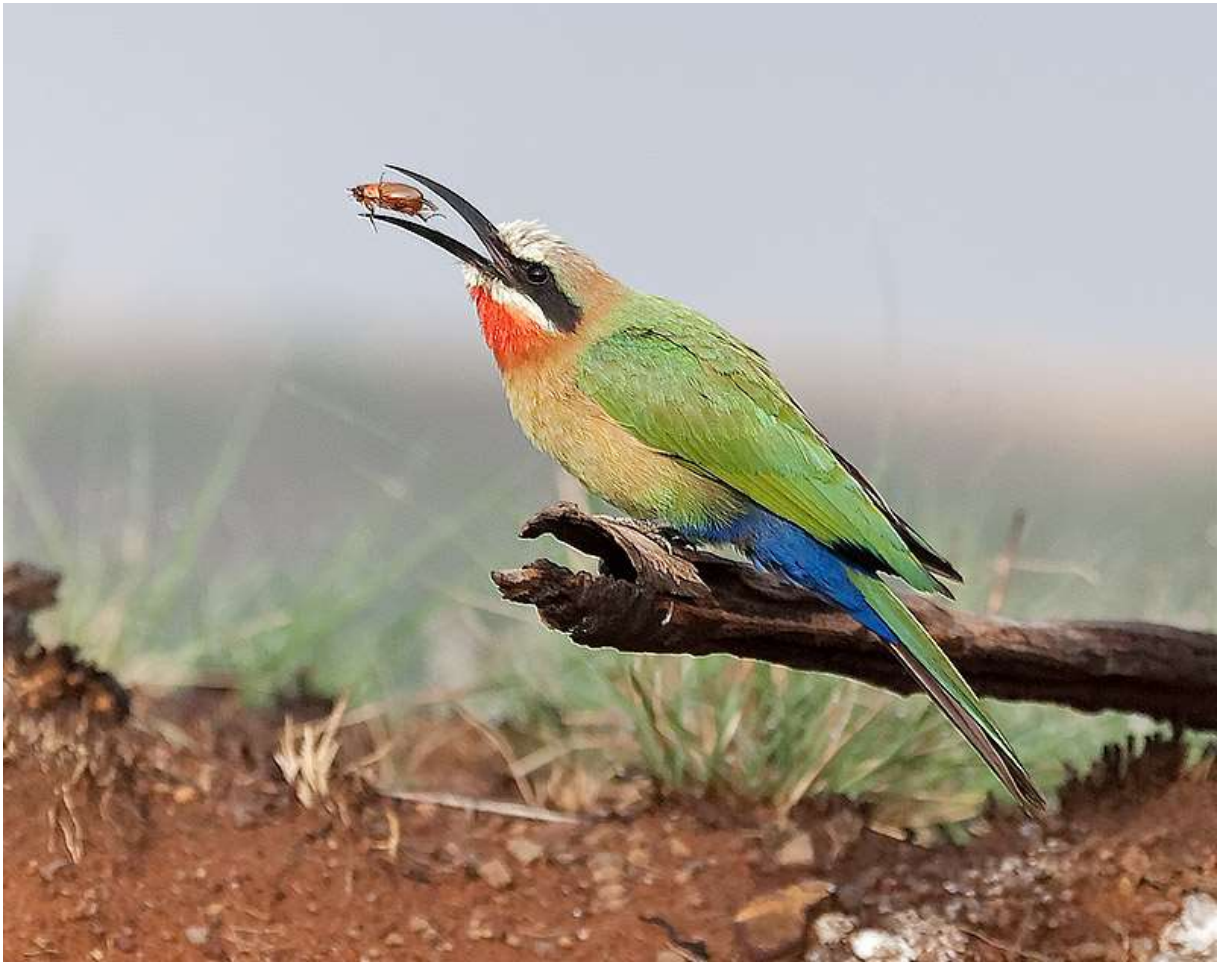
I started this module by saying that taking exceptional wildlife photographs is both easy and fun to take. That is quite a statement to make about wildlife photography, which is well known for its challenges, and you have every right to ask me to justify my comment. In part, I have just done so, by going through the process of "photographing the bird" above, but also consider this truism: To take exceptional wildlife photographs, you need only two things –

1) Being in the right place at the right time, and
2) Having the right equipment and knowing how to use it.

You may want to retort: "True enough – but easy to say, yet difficult to achieve". My point is to break the complex problem down into simple components and study each in turn. As the old adage goes – "How do you eat an elephant? – One bite at a time".

The rest of this course comprises "bite-sized" pieces of the elephant, and the course has been structured so that we tackle the right things at the right time. But in closing, I want to make one thing crystal clear. You will maximise your benefit from this course by working through it in its entirety – that way, you will strengthen all your links, especially your weakest link.

The important lesson in this module lies in the words: Prepare yourself instead to become part of a working, natural system, proceed methodically and thoughtfully, and exciting and rewarding photographic opportunities will reveal themselves to you. The more you know about your subject, the better your photographs will be. I also said above that half the battle is to be in the right place at the right time. But remember that it takes knowledge of your subject to know the right place and time.



Capturing the right moment is always a good way to get the attention of those who view your photographs. Many "amateur" wildlife photographers believe in the "pray and spray" technique. You use your camera like a machine gun hoping that one picture will work out. Not only does this method rarely succeed, it is frustrating even when it does, as it is based purely on luck and is therefore unrepeatable. A much better approach is to develop a good technique – and that it is done through patience and careful observation. For instance, a hunting bird like this bee-eater will frequently catch its prey and then "position" it in the beak for convenient swallowing. Since the bird has no hands to position its food, it tosses it into the air and catches it in the correct position, like this bird is doing. And the technique that the bird uses will vary with its prey. If the bird catches a bee, it will gently squeeze the bee to expose its sting and then wipe it on a branch to force it out.

Once you reach this level of interaction with your subject, you learn to anticipate behaviour and capture it with the camera.