



HELP ME GO WILD IN AFRICA!

In our most ambitious Apprentice shoot ever, we follow the photographic fortunes of reader Tracy Angus-Hammond as she heads to Botswana with multi-award-winning wildlife photographer and lifelong Nikon aficionado Lou Coetzer

THE PRO...**NAME** Lou Coetzer
CAMERAS D4, D800

■ A former sports and portrait photographer with over 40 years' experience, Lou is now one of the world's most respected wildlife photographers. His experience in shooting fast-moving action and his work as a portrait pro have informed his approach to wildlife photography: "I am," he says "in a constant search for exquisitely-lit, dynamic action images shot against clean backgrounds. Only when there isn't any action will I start to look for the graphic image." He is the founder and owner of CNP Safaris, which runs photography workshops in Botswana, Alaska and elsewhere (see page 20). For details, visit www.loucoetzer.co.za or www.cnpsafaris.com

THE APPRENTICE...**NAME** Tracy
Angus-Hammond
CAMERA D3100

■ Market researcher Tracy, from Johannesburg, South Africa, has been interested in photography for as long as she can remember. Her first photos were taken on an old 110 film camera, and she bought her first D-SLR – a Nikon D50 – with her second paycheque. She currently shoots on a Nikon D3100, and because her work as a market researcher takes her all over Africa, she has plenty of opportunity to put her photographic skills to the test, and to capture what she calls the 'magic' of her home continent. She's especially interested in wildlife, and is hoping to learn how to take her photographs beyond the level of the standard tourist snapshot.



EXPOSURE 1/1000 sec, f/11, ISO800
LENS Nikon AF-S 600mm f/4G ED VR

OUR APPRENTICE SAYS...



“ For this tight portrait of a crocodile basking in the sun [above], I took Lou’s advice about setting a high ISO, and used it to get the depth of field I needed. I set an aperture of f/11 in aperture-priority mode to ensure there would be enough depth of field to get the crocodile as sharp as possible from front to back. I also dialed in a stop of negative exposure compensation, as otherwise the dark background would have been rendered as an average midtone, and the highlights in the croc would have started to blow out. At ISO800 this gave me a shutter speed of 1/1000 sec – not quite as fast as I’d have liked on Lou’s 600mm f/4, but I didn’t want to push the ISO any higher – and thanks to the gimbal heads mounted on Lou’s boat, it was just about fast enough [see Killer Kit #02 and #03, and page 124 for more on gimbal heads]. I love the way the strong side-lighting brings out the texture of the croc’s skin, and helps lift it off the darker background. ”

EXPERT INSIGHT THE NEED FOR SPEED

Lou says... 90 per cent of wildlife shots fall down on shutter speed. You have to remember that a fast shutter speed isn’t just needed to freeze any camera shake, it’s also needed to freeze the movement of your subject. For longer lenses, such as Nikon’s 600mm f/4 [see Killer Kit #01] I try to use shutter speeds at least three times faster than the reciprocal of the focal length – so 1/1800 sec in the case of the 600mm, rather than the more usual 1/600 sec for static subjects.



◀ Abstract thought

“Once you’ve got a classic portrait in the bag, try cropping in tighter to photograph a more abstract detail,” suggests Lou. “This works particularly well with a subject like this crocodile, with its rich patterns and varied textures. It’s a portrait of sorts, and it makes a nice addition to a wider portfolio.”



HOT SHOT #01

▼ Don't use VR

"I rarely use VR," says Lou, "in part because it only helps with hand movement, NOT subject movement. It also slows down autofocus a fraction, and with fast-moving wildlife – a flock of spoonbills flying straight at you, for example – this can mean the difference between nailing a sharp shot and getting nothing. I prefer to use my ISO setting to enable faster shutter speeds." (See Technique Assessment.)



PRO'S KILLER KIT #01 NIKON AF-S 600mm f/4G ED VR

Lou says... This is arguably the ultimate wildlife lens for subjects that are distant, or small, or both, as it boasts superfast AF and is pin-sharp across the frame. At 600mm, though, shutter speed (and therefore) ISO become even more crucial: the slightest movement of the lens, whether this is from camera shake or, say, the vibration from a boat or 4WD, can result in blurred shots. Try holding a pair of binoculars perfectly still, and you'll see what I mean!



TECHNIQUE ASSESSMENT

Ready for a walk on the wild side?

Tracy tends not to play too much with her settings, so Lou made a few suggestions...

Increase the ISO

Lou says... Tracy doesn't really use her D3100's ISO setting, but with wildlife, where shutter speed is everything, I always advocate setting the highest ISO possible while still maintaining the quality of the image. This may sound a bit counter-intuitive, but it gives you the flexibility to set a smaller aperture.



Use exposure compensation

Lou says... Tracy shoots in aperture-priority mode, but she never uses exposure compensation. To protect highlights, and to preserve detail in whites, I tend to set -1EV, and sometimes as much as -2EV for darker subjects. Not only does this help prevent blown highlights, it has the added advantage of increasing the shutter speed.



Use the histogram view

Lou says... With high-contrast subjects in very bright light it's worth checking your histogram every so often, to make sure you're not losing detail in the highlights. This is especially important at the start and end of the day, when light levels can change quite quickly.



PRO'S KIT BAG

- Nikon D4 ■ Nikon D800
- Nikon AF-S 400mm f/4
- Nikon AF-S 600mm f/4 (with camouflage coat)
- Nikon 1.4x teleconverter ■ Nikon 1.7x teleconverter
- Nikon 2.0x teleconverter
- Sigma 120-300mm f/2.8 DG OS HSM
- Sigma 1.4x teleconverter
- Sigma 2.0x teleconverter



HOT SHOT #02

EXPOSURE 1/1600 sec, f/10, ISO800
LENS Nikon AF-S 600mm f/4G ED VR

OUR APPRENTICE SAYS...



“ For this shot of an Egyptian goose [left], Lou suggested framing it to make the most of the reflection, and the lovely bronze colour of the foreground water. As with the shot of the crocodile, I set a small aperture—in this case f/10—to get the bird sharp from its eye to its tail. This meant that the background wasn't quite as blurred as I'd have liked. In an ideal world I'd have positioned it against a much cleaner background, but that's not always an option when you're floating in the middle of a crocodile-infested river! ”

▶ Eyes front

“You hear a lot about focusing on the eyes when shooting wildlife,” says Lou, “and this is fine for static subjects, but for anything that's moving it's often challenging enough to get anything in focus, let alone the eyes. For this reason I suggest focusing on the front of the subject rather than the eye, then adjusting the aperture if you want the eye to be sharp too.”



◀ Make your point

Continuous autofocus and high-speed continuous drive mode are a given when you're photographing wildlife, but it's also worth taking control of the AF point. Auto-select AF point might focus on the wrong thing at just the wrong moment, resulting in a missed shot. If in doubt, either select the central AF point and recompose, or, for off-centre subjects, select an AF point that sits over the edge you want to focus on.

EXPERT INSIGHT KEEP IT CLEAN

Lou says... Background is another area where wildlife images often fall short. You wouldn't take a portrait of someone with a rubbish dump in the background, and the same goes for wildlife subjects with leaves, twigs and other distractions in the background. Whenever possible you should position your subject—or more usually yourself—so that the background is as clean as possible, as this gives you more flexibility in terms of depth of field. At f/4 even a busy background will blur out, but if you want to set a smaller aperture to get your subject sharp from front to back—as with Tracy's Hotshot here—the cleaner the background, the better.



PRO PORTFOLIO WILD AT HEART

Lou has amassed a portfolio of amazing wildlife images taken on the Chobe river in Botswana. Here are some of his favourites...



Flood Season

During flood season on the Chobe, African fish eagles find it difficult to catch fish in the high waters, so will often take alternative prey like rodents, small mammals and reptiles, and even birds. Here, a fish eagle is approaching its nest after taking a juvenile black crane.



Feather Flurry

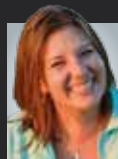
Crocodiles also find it difficult to catch fish in the flood season, so the larger crocs will take mammals, while the younger crocodiles will sometimes catch birds instead. In this shot, a juvenile crocodile has caught a Cape turtle dove.



Bull Elephant Bachelor Party

While making their way across the Chobe river, a group of elephants grazes on the bank. For this shot to work it was crucial that all the elephants were sharp, so I focused on the ground just below the first elephant and stopped down.

OUR APPRENTICE SAYS...



“ This shot [opposite] is another good example of needing to set a fairly small aperture to ensure that all of the elephants were sharp – in this case f/14. At ISO800 this gave me a shutter speed of just 1/250 sec, which was in danger of being perilously slow, but again Lou’s Wimberley gimbal heads came to the rescue. For this particular shot, Lou encouraged me to crop in tight, to completely eliminate any background and create a more graphic image. Because of the slow shutter speed, the image is not quite as sharp as I’d like it to be, but the fantastic late-evening light, and the way that the adults are interacting with the younger elephant, more than make up for this. ”

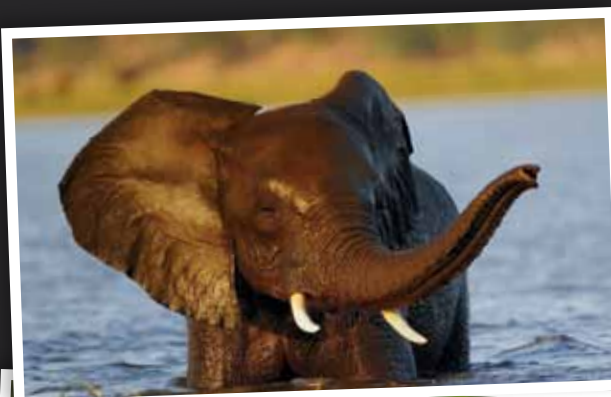
▶ Stay on track

Another must for wildlife is back-button focusing, which enables you to autofocus with your thumb and release the shutter with your forefinger. This makes it easier to track moving subjects; you simply place your chosen AF point over your subject, hold your thumb down to focus on it, and then track it through the viewfinder until you’re ready to take the shot. In continuous AF mode, as long as you keep your thumb on the AF-ON button, your camera will continually adjust the focus, even if your subject is moving towards or away from you at speed.



EXPERT INSIGHT HOLD FIRE

Lou says... With a frame rate of five, seven or even 11 frames a second, the temptation is to fire away. I’ve had clients on my workshops who think that if they shoot 2000 frames a day, they’ll be sure to get something, when in all likelihood they’ll get bugger all! The key is to anticipate behaviour, and to shoot in short bursts – you don’t want to miss the action, but you don’t want to ‘spray and pray’, and then have to wade through 2000 images every night hoping that one of them will be a winner.



◀ Take sides

In Africa, soft, overcast light is the exception rather than the rule, so the direction of the sunlight, which can be quite intense even early in morning and late in the afternoon, is all-important. Lou favours low front-lighting as it keeps shadows at bay, and can provide a subtle catchlight in subject’s eyes. Side-lighting can be used to reveal texture, but you need to be aware of shadows. Backlighting is an option, too, either to provide a rimlight, or to silhouette an animal with an instantly recognisable profile, like an elephant, against a sunset (see this issue’s cover shot).

HOT SHOT #03



EXPOSURE 1/250 sec, f/14, ISO800
LENS Nikon AF-S 600mm f/4G ED VR

◀ **Good behaviour**

On safari, where wildlife is plentiful, nailing a straightforward portrait of the most common birds and animals isn't too challenging, so once you've nailed a classic 'record' shot, the next step is to capture some element of an animal's behaviour. This could be something as simple as an elephant taking a bath [left], or something more complex, such as social interaction, as in Hot Shot #03. Anything that helps to tell a story will add interest, and take your shot to the next level.

PRO'S KILLER KIT #02 GIMBAL HEAD

Lou says... This bit of kit goes hand in hand with Killer Kit #03, but whether you're shooting from a boat, a 4WD or a tripod, a gimbal head is essential when you're using a long – and heavy – telephoto lens. They take all of the strain while still allowing freedom of movement. They're not cheap, and they take some getting used to, but if you shoot a lot of wildlife they're worth every penny [see page 124 for our round-up of five of the best gimbal heads].



HOT SHOT #04



EXPOSURE 1/6000 sec, f/11, ISO800

LENS Nikon AF-S 600mm f/4G ED VR

EXPERT INSIGHT PULL IT OFF

Lou says... Only break the rules if it's going to take your image to another level. Techniques like motion blur and abstract composition are all well and good, but more often than not they're used to mask a lack of technical ability. If you've got a pin-sharp shot of your subject that you're 100 per cent happy with, then by all means try something more adventurous, but don't just do it because you're not sure how to get a sharp shot in the first place!

▶ Fill the frame

With birds in flight, the key is to fill the frame, and more often than not this means using a long lens (see page 50 for more on photographing birds in flight). Having said that, with fast-moving birds it's best to start tracking them when they're small in the frame, and to start shooting only when they start to fill it. If you don't, with a long telephoto lens you may not even be able to find the bird in the viewfinder, let alone frame it!



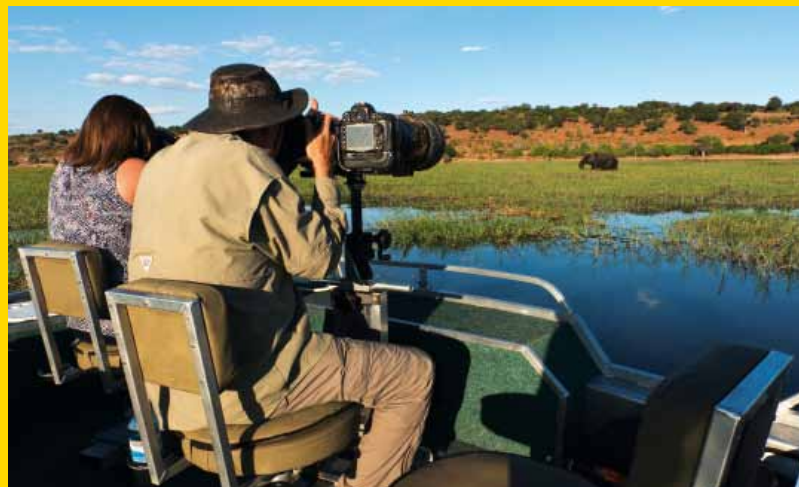
OUR APPRENTICE SAYS...



“ This image of an African darter drying its wings in the early morning sun was taken on our final day on the Chobe, and by then I had my exposure settings pretty nailed! The dark background, and even darker plumage, meant that I had to dial in exposure compensation of -1.67 to stop both the water and the feathers from looking washed out. An aperture of f/11 ensured that the tips of both wings were sharp, while still keeping the background nicely blurred out and – to Lou’s lasting satisfaction – perfectly clean. It’s the gorgeous golden light on the bird’s feathers that make it, though – that and the graceful curves of its neck, tail and wings. ”

PRO’S KILLER KIT #03 CUSTOM-BUILT PHOTO BOAT!

One of the keys to the high hit-rate on Lou’s workshops is the photography boat that he has had designed to his own specifications. Instead of the usual array of seats down both sides, it boasts just a single row running down the middle. Each seat can be swivelled a full 360 degrees, so no matter which way the boat is pointing, you can still shoot in any direction. Attached to each is a fully-adjustable pneumatic camera support, with a gimbal head, and attached to each of these is a 600mm f/4 lens. Add in a local guide who knows the river like the back of his hand, and can put you exactly where you need to be, and you have all the ingredients for a successful shoot.



▲ Character study

When shooting more abstract images of animals, focus on something that captures an aspect of their character, such as the prehistoric scales of the croc on page 10, or the extended wings of this African darter. Darters are known for the way they spread out their wings to dry, so by cropping in tight here, and going for a slightly wider aspect ratio than the standard 3:2, Tracy has made the behaviour the subject of the image.

▼ Up close, but not too personal

As Tracy discovered, one of the big advantages of shooting from a dedicated photo boat is that it enables you to get extremely close to the wildlife on the shore without disturbing it – or getting *too* close!



THE FINAL ASSESSMENT...

■ After three days on the river it was time for Lou and Tracy to sit down and go through all of her shots, and pick out the best using Lou's rating system, which goes from one star (sharp, clean background, technically sound) to five stars (a surefire award-winner). "A robust rating system is the only way you can hope to be objective about your own images," advises Lou.

OUR APPRENTICE SAYS...



“Initially I struggled with the long lenses, and I shot everything that moved, which meant I had thousands of shots to trawl through, but with Lou's expert guidance, I started to get my eye in, and soon became a bit more discerning. Lou's advice on focusing modes, and where to focus, made a big difference to my hit rate, but for me the biggest lesson was the importance of ISO, and using it to enable smaller apertures when more depth of field is called for. In the past I'd have just set my lens's widest aperture to blur out the background as much as possible, but when you're shooting at close range with a 600mm lens, you have to be much more discriminating if you want your subject to be sharp from front to back.”

OUR PRO'S VERDICT



“Tracy was a great Apprentice. She was enthusiastic, and not scared to throw the kitchen sink at her photography, in a way that went far beyond her abilities when she started. In just three days on the Chobe river her wildlife photography went into orbit, as her stunning Shot of the Day shows.

For me the most difficult wildlife images to nail are those where you're working with a super-telephoto lens – in this case a 600mm f/4 VR with 1.4x converter – and photographing a small subject at close range fairly full in the frame. In the case of Tracy's African jacana image, the depth of field was just centimetres, and the glossy white against the dark background had all the potential to blow out.

These energetic birds are not easy to keep in the viewfinder either, and getting a clean background requires a lot of discipline. Tracy's image ticks all the boxes: it includes some action, the bird is pin-sharp from front to back and the background is nicely blurred. All in all, a stunning wildlife image!”

SHOT OF THE DAY!



EXPOSURE 1/5000 sec, f/8, ISO800
LENS Nikon AF-S 600mm f/4G ED VR

NEXT MONTH DISHING UP!

We work up an appetite shooting scrumptious shots of seasonal food – it'll give you photographic food for thought

ISSUE 51 ON SALE
24 SEPTEMBER 2015



WIN
YOUR OWN PHOTO
SAFARI IN AFRICA!
SEE OVERLEAF
FOR DETAILS

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE OUR NEXT APPRENTICE?



Do you want to take your photography to the next level and learn first-hand from a top-flight pro? If you'd like a chance of being our next *N-Photo* Apprentice, let us know what you'd like help shooting and your full contact details. Email mail@nphotomag.com, with 'Apprentice' as the subject line, or fill in this form...

Name.....
Address.....
Tel no.....
Email.....
Camera.....
I'd like help shooting.....

RETURN THIS FORM TO... The Apprentice, *N-Photo* Magazine, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK