

The good the bad & the ugly



THE EXPERT

Nothing irritates *BBC Wildlife* columnist and photographer **MARK CARWARDINE** more than unscrupulous wildlife photographers.

As the digital revolution opens up a new world of possibilities, **MARK CARWARDINE** considers the rights and wrongs of wildlife photography.



To take this photo of a wild mountain lion with her cubs, Tom Mangelsen needed a very long lens and endless patience.



Not all digitally manipulated images are as easy to spot as this example, created by Paul Hobson specially for this feature.



Many people don't realise that animals are kept in shocking conditions to provide models for 'wildlife' photographers.

YOU MIGHT HAVE thought that wildlife photography would be a pleasant, harmless and harmonious activity. And, in many ways, it is. It certainly gives a great deal of pleasure to millions of people.

But it's also a hotbed of controversy, arousing some very strong and opposing views about how it should be done. Is digital manipulation acceptable? Is it OK to photograph animals in zoos? What about hiring an animal model that has been trained to pose for photographers? Is camera trapping a viable technique? There are no easy answers, but hopefully this article will provide some food for thought.

DIGITAL MANIPULATION

Photographers have been manipulating their images since the earliest days of their art. The iconic portrait of US President Abraham Lincoln, taken in 1860, is one of the first cases of serious fakery – it's actually a composite of Lincoln's head grafted onto someone else's body.

Even the great landscape photographer Ansel Adams used to work more than a little magic in his traditional darkroom. He was quite open about it and happy for people to compare a straight print of his famous 1941 photo *Moonrise, Hernandez* with the heavily 'dodged' and 'burned', high-contrast prints that he exhibited. He wasn't trying to trick anyone, of course, but the difference between the two was quite extraordinary.

In those days, there was an assumed truth in photography. People genuinely believed that "the camera never lies" and that what they were seeing was an accurate record. But then, in 1982, *National Geographic* catapulted photographic manipulation into the headlines. Its designers famously squeezed together two Egyptian pyramids to make the image suitable for the cover.

The 'squeeze' caused an uproar but, far from stopping photographic forgeries, it heralded a new era in which manipulating photographs has become almost routine. What's changed is the advent of digital photography. The technology is so good these days that it's easier than ever for photographers and art editors to make significant changes to pictures without most people ever knowing. Indeed, it is actively encouraged by the adverts for some digital manipulation software: one memorable slogan tells us to "Spread Lies".

Does any of this really matter? After all, most of us assume that fashion, advertising and even paparazzi photos are likely to have been doctored in some way. We live in a world where airbrushed celebrities rule.

Mountain lions: Thomas D Mangelsen/mangelsen.com; digital composite of birds: Paul Hobson/game farm; Jonathan Long/jonlong.com

Well, many of us in the wildlife photography business *do* care. We believe that there should be a tacit understanding between photographer and viewer that what you see in a picture represents the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Sadly, this isn't always the case. Some professional photographers will add or remove anything that makes an image more commercial. If they think that a polar bear would look better in a snowstorm, they use computer wizardry to include some falling snow. If two baby gorillas would be better than one, they simply add a second.

What really raises the hackles of most nature photographers is the attempt to pass off heavily manipulated images as genuine. At the very least these photographers could admit that their pictures have been faked by

HOW TO MAKE A FAKE



1 The photographer scattered seeds at the base of a tree as bait, chose a wide-angle lens and settled down to wait.



2 He took a series of photos of different squirrels using a tripod so that the background in every frame was identical.



3 Finally, two images showing squirrels in different positions were merged in Photoshop to make this composite.

Elliott Neep prepared this digital composite of red squirrels specially for this feature.

disclosing in the captions that they are digital art and not authentic photographs. But they don't. The camera itself may never lie but, sadly, some photographers do.

DECENCY AND DECEPTION

At this point I ought to stress that creative computer (as opposed to photographic) skills can produce quite beautiful results. And one might also argue that photography is an art, after all, so its aim should be to make pictures as appealing and eye-catching as possible. Nevertheless, lying about images has two serious repercussions.

First, deceitful photographers steal the trust that should be inherent in wildlife images. Once a few cheated photographs have shaken your confidence, you begin to doubt everything you see. In this respect, the culprits do themselves a disservice, too – as far as I'm concerned, *all* of their images become suspect.

Second, digitally manipulated images raise the bar in wildlife photography to an unnaturally high level. Everyone begins to demand better and better shots based on the artificial ones they've seen before. This puts enormous pressure on other photographers to compete, either by slipping into the world of digital manipulation themselves or by pushing their subjects to the limit in a vain attempt to achieve the impossible.

Many experts believe that the answer lies in honest captioning. I agree – but only up to a point. What is the likelihood of mainstream publications telling their readers that a picture isn't real? It's certainly something they should be striving for, but they worry that their readers might feel disappointed if they were told that a beautiful image was created largely on the computer rather than in the wild. So confessing sins in the caption may ease a photographer's conscience, but it doesn't solve the fundamental problem.

As nature photographers, we should strive to represent our subjects as faithfully as possible. This means minimal tampering and never trying to misrepresent what we are doing. My own view is that it's OK to straighten a lopsided horizon or brighten the sky, for example. Just occasionally it might be acceptable to remove a distracting branch or blade of grass – though this does feel like straying into dangerous territory.

How about removing a ring from a bird's leg? Many photographers believe this to be acceptable, especially professionals who know that images of tagged animals rarely sell. A lot of British red kites have wing tags, for instance, but how often do you see them in photos? Have all the tags been digitally removed or do people photograph only the kites without tags? I know honest professionals who really do wait until the

Staffan Widstrand



This snowy owl is hunting live bait that Staffan Widstrand put in place seconds earlier. The mouse is a species found in the area, it forms part of the owl's natural diet and died instantly, but many people feel that this is unethical.

untagged kites come along, but there are many others who just clone them out in Photoshop. Is it important who does what?

So it's largely a matter of degree. Most photographers use image-editing software to enhance their photos. I do myself. The point is that we all have to decide which lines we are prepared to cross. And, in making those decisions, we have a responsibility to all of our nature photography colleagues and to everyone who sees our pictures.

CAPTIVE SUBJECTS

Whether it is right to photograph animals in captivity is another subject that's guaranteed to ignite heated debate. Even well-travelled pros sometimes work in zoos, because it provides an opportunity to take intimate portraits of shy or endangered animals that are seldom seen in the wild. Surely there's no harm in it? Well, yes and no.

Some people couldn't give two hoots how a photograph was taken. They're not bothered if the photographer spent weeks sleeping rough in a mosquito-infested swamp to get the shot,

or merely an afternoon at the local safari park. They're just interested in the end result: is it a great photo? Many others, meanwhile, still want to believe in the romance of the intrepid photographer.

Either way, I think you can often recognise a zoo animal in a photograph – it's too fat or out of condition or simply doesn't display the right 'jizz' (the characteristic behaviour of the species). Many captive mammals have facial expressions that just don't look like those of wild individuals.

Some people choose never to photograph animals unless they are completely wild and free. Partly, this is because they believe that working in a zoo takes the 'wild' out of 'wildlife photography' – they want nothing less than to photograph a genuinely wild animal in its natural surroundings. But it's also because they don't like to support the keeping of animals in captivity.

A much more controversial aspect of photographing captive animals is the use of trained individuals, or models. A tame mountain lion, for example, can be hired for

HOW TO USE BAIT TO PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE

Almost everyone has baited wildlife at one time or another – even if it's merely putting out food on a bird table. But doing so for photography comes with great responsibility, because animals can become habituated to humans and may end up dependent on your artificial food source. Follow these rules:

- » Provide only organic food that is part of the animals' natural diet.
- » Be wary of live bait. It is probably OK to

offer mealworms to songbirds, but providing mice for birds of prey is a step too far.

- » Try not to leave the bait out too long.
- » Don't feed large species that are potentially dangerous.
- » Don't use sounds as bait if they are likely to cause unnecessary stress.
- » Use the waterholes and feeding stations already provided in nature reserves.
- » Stress in the caption that you used bait.

anything from a few hours to several days and moved to a suitable location by truck or helicopter (see p63). The photographer takes pictures from a few metres away while the animal is made to run through the snow, jump over a gate or drink from a pool. To all intents and purposes, it will look wild and free – but, of course, it is not.

Advocates of this popular form of nature photography often argue that the animal models are well looked after, if for no other reason than photographers demand healthy and happy-looking subjects. However, I have heard lots of horror stories suggesting that many of the animals are badly mistreated and kept in tiny cages.

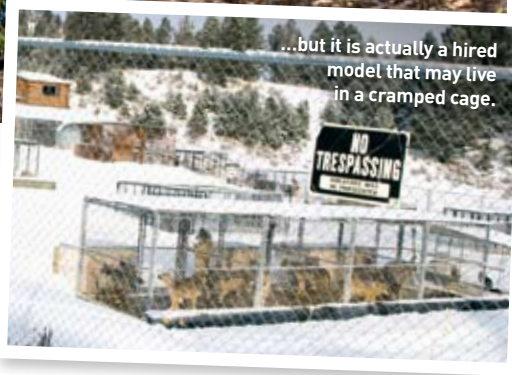
The photographer takes pictures while the mountain lion is made to run through the snow or jump a gate.

Some photographers also maintain that, if it weren't for animal models, certain rare or elusive species would hardly ever be photographed, and therefore would never be brought to public attention. Siberian tigers are a classic example – there are very few images of them in the wild. The vast majority of Siberian tiger photos feature models or animals that live permanently in captivity.

One could argue that, given enough time and effort, any animal could be photographed in the wild. That's true to a certain extent, and taking pictures exclusively in the wild is without doubt a noble goal. But do we really want hordes of photographers out there, causing untold disruption and disturbance while they try to get that elusive shot?

Opponents of the use of animal models claim that it's a lazy form of wildlife photography. Personally, I am against it because the underlying pretence – that the animals are wild and free – is entirely wrong. I also believe that keeping an animal in captivity purely for the benefit of paying photographers is totally unethical. ▶

This mountain lion, or cougar, may look wild and free...



CODE OF CONDUCT

Some photographers are prepared to do almost anything to get the shot they want, so conservation groups and photography associations have published a number of codes of conduct for wildlife photography. Most of the recommendations are common sense – the welfare of the subject is more important than getting the photo. Here are a few key points to remember:

- » Always photograph animals from a safe and respectful distance.
- » If an animal shows any sign of stress, move further back or leave altogether.
- » Be patient and never try to force an animal to do something. Remember that the impact of many people is cumulative: you might be the 100th person that day to yell “Hey moose” while the poor creature is trying to feed or care for its young.
- » Never encroach on nests or dens during the breeding season.
- » Treat the habitat with the same regard that you have for the animals themselves.
- » Respect local cultures and customs when you are working abroad.
- » Check published recommendations, such as the excellent code produced by the Nature Group of The Royal Photographic Society: www.rpsnaturegroup.com
- » Finally, always be honest and truthful when captioning your photos.

There’s also no doubt that camera trapping can produce some exciting results. It offers a privileged glimpse into the natural world that would otherwise be almost impossible to achieve with traditional photographic techniques, while causing little disturbance to the animals and their habitats.

INDIVIDUAL INTEGRITY

In the end, ethical wildlife photography is largely a matter of individual integrity. We should be free to do whatever inspires us creatively, so long as it causes no harm to the animals or plants we are photographing, to other people or to nature photography as a whole. But it’s more than that. It’s also about a responsibility to the audience – and honesty. Unattributed digital manipulation or passing captive animals off as wild is lying, plain and simple.

Once the honesty has gone – and some days I don’t think we’re all that far from losing it – the power of nature photography has been lost forever.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What is acceptable in wildlife photography? Does it matter if an animal is captive? Let us know your thoughts (see p109).

Great camera-trap photos are not simply the result of chance. The success rate is amazingly low.

What’s worse, photographers may hire animal models, pass them off as wild and even concoct elaborate stories about how they spent weeks or months in the field to get their shots. This is unforgivable. Moreover, pretending that captive or restrained animals are wild can have serious credibility consequences for the organisations that publish the images without knowing the truth about how they were made.

There are few straightforward, black-and-white answers to any of these issues. There are no absolute rights and wrongs. But there’s one rule on which most serious wildlife photographers agree – the audience has a right to know whether a picture was taken under controlled conditions or in the wild. Again, it comes down to honesty and truthful captioning (a categorical ‘captive’ should be used to avoid any confusion).

HOW TO GET THE SHOT

Nearly all photos of moles emerging from their hills show dead animals that have been posed. Photographers can get away with it because the animals have such tiny eyes, so it’s hard to tell if they are alive. The moles are often groomed with a toothbrush and blow-dried so that they look their best for the camera.



CAMERA TRAPS

A more recent controversy is the use of remotely controlled cameras, or camera traps. The basic concept is quite simple: a camera is set up where an animal is likely to visit and, when it trips a pressure plate or infrared sensor, it takes its own picture.

One of the main concerns about camera trapping is a feeling that if the photographer isn’t there to press the button, it’s cheating. It certainly makes a mockery of the old adage that the only camera setting you need is “f8 and be there”. But ‘being there’ is an impossible dream, or at least a luxury, when it comes to many rare and shy species. And just because the photographer was sipping coffee in his or her tent when the picture was taken doesn’t make it any less ‘real’.

Great camera-trap photos are definitely not the result of simple blind chance. The success rate is amazingly low. The photographer needs to have enough field skills to be able to predict where and when an animal is likely to pass, and how it might trigger the camera shutter, as well as advanced technical knowhow to make it all happen. Creativity is important, too – the best camera-trap shots are all envisioned in advance and then carefully planned.

True, many of the best camera-trap images have been taken with the considerable financial and technical support of *National Geographic*, but bear in mind that you have to be a top-notch photographer anyway to get this kind of backing. Besides, simple camera trap set-ups are on sale for less than the price of a new lens – and their potential is huge.

Mountain lion: Imagebroker/FLPA; cages: Jonathan Long/fotlong.com

Laurie Campbell took this photo of a mole killed by his neighbour’s cat specially for this feature.