

# Photo Masterclass



Our new series of in-depth tutorials provides a practical guide to the key principles of successful wildlife photography, illustrated with the work of top professionals. In the first of the series, we begin by clearing out all the clutter.

With wildlife photographer **MARK CARWARDINE**

New series



## PART ONE

# Keep it simple

**THERE ARE NO** hard-and-fast rules in wildlife photography: it is an art form, after all, and rules tend to stifle creativity. But by learning a number of professional tips and tricks you can improve your pictures almost overnight. With help and advice from many of the world's top photographers, we'll be exploring the best of these over the next year. Our aim is simple: by the end of the course, you should be able to make an image of sparrows and squirrels in your garden much more eye-catching than most people's holiday pictures of vultures and lions on the African savannah.

In this first masterclass, we'll be removing all of the clutter from your pictures: the photographic equivalent of a spring-clean. Simple images tend to have greater impact than ones that are bulging at the seams with unwanted distractions (bright bits are particularly annoying and tend to pull the viewer's eye away from your star attraction faster than the click of a shutter). The trick is to present a clear message and, to do that, you need to remove all the superfluous branches, rocks, posts, arms and anything else that might compete with your primary subject. So this month's golden rule is simplicity: less is more.

▲ A SHELDUCK DUCKLING LOOKS its best with nothing else in the picture: no fallen leaves, no riverbank, no other ducklings, no distracting elements at all. Even the water is indistinct and helps to make the subject 'pop'.



Bence Máté

This satiny parrot snake was photographed in a Costa Rican rainforest – but by removing all clues to location and habitat, Bence has imbued the eyes with maximum impact.

## 1 REMEMBER TO K.I.S.S.

**BENCE MÁTÉ SATINY PARROT SNAKE**



Bence was the 2010 Veolia Environnement Wildlife Photographer of the Year. [www.matebence.hu](http://www.matebence.hu)

Try to remember the simple acronym KISS – Keep it Simple and Sweet – when you are composing. In other words, ask yourself “What am I trying to convey in this photograph?” Then go through a process of elimination: force yourself to remove anything that isn’t relevant to your vision.

Bence Máté, whose work has been recognised in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition many times in recent years, has done precisely that in this striking photograph of a satiny parrot snake.

What do you think moved him to choose this as a photographic subject? The snake’s eyes, of course. It’s obvious, because Bence has done it so well. To make the eyes ‘sing’ he has made them the only element of the picture that is pin-sharp. Not only is the background blurred, but most of the snake is blurred as well. “I wanted just enough detail to see quite clearly that it is a snake,” says Bence, “but not enough to distract from the eyes, which were the whole point of the image.”

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D300 + zoom lens at 105mm; 1/50 sec at f7.1

The starkness of the setting accentuates the translucent beauty of this greater knapweed.

## 2 GO TO EXTREMES

**NIALL BENVIE GREATER KNAPWEED**



Niall is a nature photographer based in Scotland, a member of the 2020VISION project. [www.imagesfromtheedge.com](http://www.imagesfromtheedge.com)

Some photographers take pictures that are garbled, ambiguous and complicated by distracting visual elements. Not Niall.

This is an extreme example of ‘keeping it simple’. No one is suggesting that all nature photographs should be like this (not so much a spring-clean as a house clearance), but it does demonstrate just how little you need to make a strong visual statement.

“I photographed this greater knapweed in the wild, using a field studio,” says Niall. “Shooting against a pure white, backlit background allowed me to show the subject in great detail and, at the same time, to reveal its translucent qualities. In this sort of picture, the role of the photographer is diminished and the subject is the star: its shape and form create the composition.”

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D2X + 200mm f4 lens; 1/200 sec at f18

Niall Benvie



## I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT MY FIELD STUDIO

**NIALL BENVIE** extolls the virtues of his mobile lighting kit.



Backlighting subjects in the wild reveals the detail and translucent qualities of each animal or plant.

“My ‘field studio’ is simple: a backlit 3mm-thick white perspex sheet and diffused front flash, manual flashguns and two tripods. It enables me to isolate and showcase each subject individually rather than as a cog in an ecosystem; common species acquire celebrity status. More details about the setup are at [www.imagesfromtheedge.com](http://www.imagesfromtheedge.com).”



It's still a simple composition, but the addition of one element – an acorn – made a good picture great.

Danny Green

## 3 FINE-TUNE COMPOSITION

**DANNY GREEN HIBERNATING DORMOUSE**



An award-winning photographer, Danny has a strong portfolio of British wildlife images. [www.dannygreenphotography.com](http://www.dannygreenphotography.com)

It’s amazing how a poor composition can sometimes be turned into a good composition by fine-tuning through the viewfinder. Moving the camera just an inch to the left, to the right, up or down to remove unwanted clutter can make a mile of difference.

But don’t get too hung up on simplicity. Sometimes, a little extra detail can make all the difference between a good photograph and a great one. It’s all about fine-tuning.

Danny Green has done exactly that with this gorgeous picture of a dormouse, taken at a research location in Devon. It would be hard to find a cuter animal, and the little creature curled up fast asleep in its nestbox would have made a wonderful picture in itself.

“But with the researcher’s permission I gently added the acorn,” says Danny, “and that lifted the image to another level. It enabled me to capture a really iconic autumn scene.”

The picture is clean and simple, but in this instance two points of interest are much better than one. And manipulating the situation added to, rather than diluted, the impact of the shot.

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon 1D Mark II + 180mm macro lens; 1/50 sec at f10; ISO 200; tripod

## 4 USE YOUR FEET

**JOSÉ B RUIZ SWALLOWTAIL CATERPILLARS**



José is a Spanish naturalist, photographer, author and natural-history film-maker. [www.josebrui.com](http://www.josebrui.com)

The most useful tool a photographer has is a pair of feet: use them to move around to find the best position. Don’t just stand where everyone else is standing (never assume that they are taking prize-winning photos) or shoot from where you happened to park the car. And don’t set up your tripod, then leave it forever in the same position.

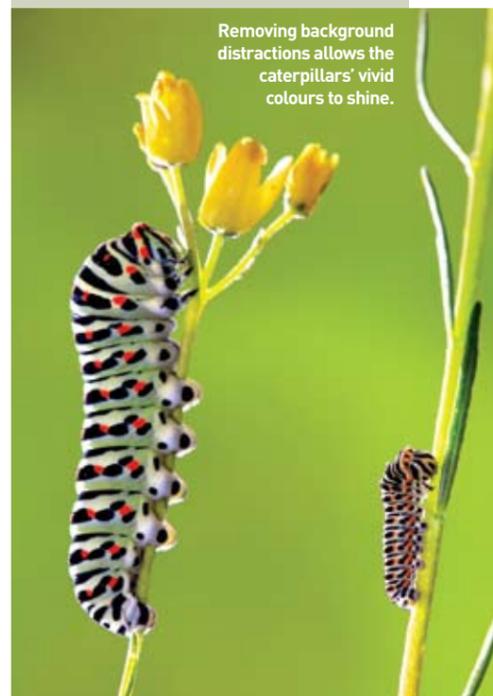
The trick is to keep moving, checking your viewfinder over and over again, until there are no distracting elements and you’re happy that everything in the frame is an essential part of the final image. Notice the photographers who seem to have ants in their pants – they are the ones working hard to find the very best position.

This is exactly what José has done. He has selected his position carefully, and blurred the background to remove unnecessary distractions. The result? His subjects ‘pop’ – they jump out of the picture – and you can see every detail of their gorgeous markings. It’s clean and simple, compelling and eye-catching.

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon 5D + 180mm macro lens + 1.4x extender; 1/250 sec at f3.5; tripod; three flashes

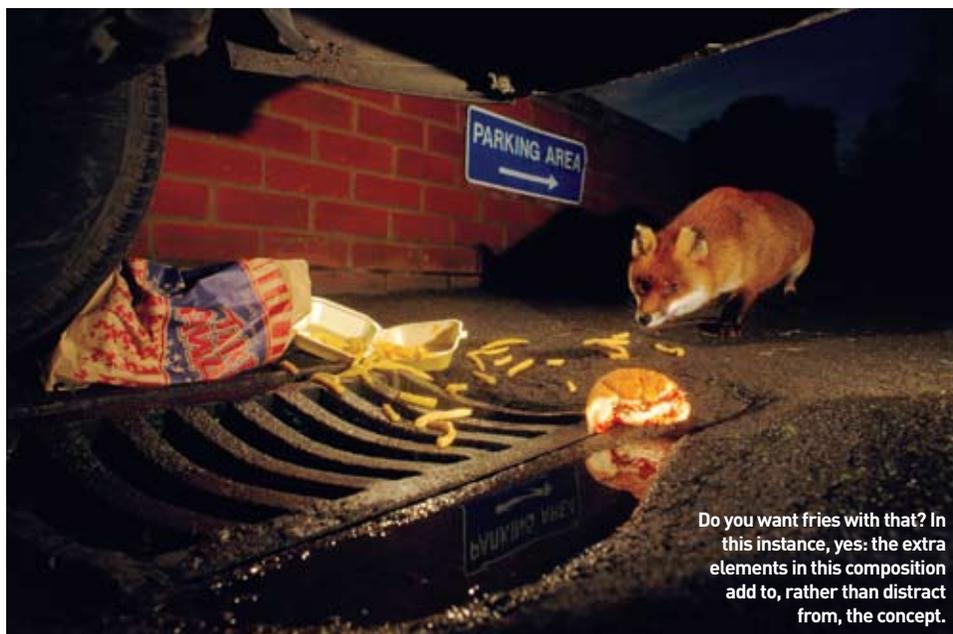
José B Ruiz



Removing background distractions allows the caterpillars’ vivid colours to shine.

## BREAKING THE RULES

Once you know the rules, bending them can result in an even better picture.



Do you want fries with that? In this instance, yes: the extra elements in this composition add to, rather than distract from, the concept.

### 5 MIX IT UP

LAURENT GESLIN JUNK FOOD FOX



Laurent specialises in photographing urban wildlife. See his portfolio of country fox photos on p18.

[www.laurent-geslin.com](http://www.laurent-geslin.com)

Experienced photographers try not to use rules excessively in case their pictures become clichéd. They bend or break them all the time to produce images that are fresh and different. But they must first understand the tenets: you can usually tell if a photographer does something intentionally, or merely takes snaps and breaks rules by mistake.

This picture of an urban fox in south London is a perfect example. Laurent has

unapologetically broken the 'keep it simple' rule. The fox is his primary subject, but there are half-a-dozen other obvious elements to this delightful urban scene. Laurent's careful composition ensures that none of the other subjects overlap or are too distracting, so he makes an otherwise complex picture really quite simple. "The picture works," he says, "because it is a simple concept: it is very easy to understand what is happening."

Incidentally, Laurent used two yellow filters over his flashgun to give the feel of a warm glow from street lights, and got down low "to make the viewer feel part of the scene".

#### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon F5 + 24 mm lens; 1/30 sec at f8; two flashes; Provia 100 ASA film

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Our pro photographers share their top tips to help you ensure that your compositions shine.

► **VISION** Consciously decide what you are trying to emphasise: a single animal, for example, or a particular mood. If you don't have a clear vision, your picture won't, either.

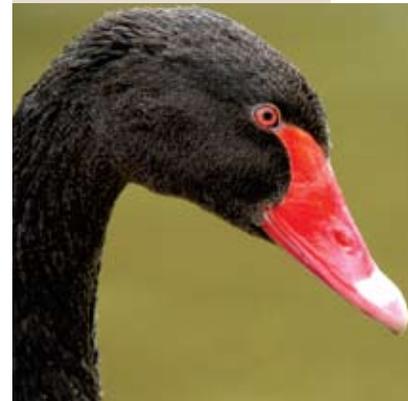
► **LESS IS MORE** Take a 'subtractive' approach to composition rather than an 'additive' one: challenge yourself to remove as much as possible from the image.

► **KEEP LOOKING** Never stop searching: keep your eye moving around the viewfinder looking for unwanted distractions.

► **HUE TOO** Remember that some colours are more distracting than others: red, for example, tends to shout loudest.

► **TAKE TIME TO THINK** Good composition takes time: if conditions allow, slow down and think before you shoot.

Mark Carwardine



For maximum impact create a simple image with one strong colour and a single focal element.

## GEEK ZONE

### APERTURE CONTROL: DEPTH OF FIELD

One way to simplify an image is to blur the background – shoot with a narrow depth of field. This is the 'in-focus zone': the space in front of and behind your subject that appears acceptably sharp. The trick is to select a depth of field that makes your subject sharp but the background blurred. Do this by controlling the aperture (the size of the hole in the lens that lets the light through). Aperture sizes are measured in f-stops. The smaller the f-stop, the larger the aperture and the narrower the depth of field. So, to make your subject stand out and blur a background, you need a small f-stop.



## NOW YOU DO IT



Read Mark's previous Photo Masterclasses, admire the experts' picture galleries and enter our online photo contests at

[DiscoverWildlife.com](http://DiscoverWildlife.com)

Laurent Geslin

Gary K. Smith/FLPA