

Photo Masterclass



To take a harmonious image, it's not enough just to capture your subject in the viewfinder – choosing exactly where to place it in the frame is a vital creative decision. Six pro photographers demonstrate how to apply the golden rule of composition.

With wildlife photographer **MARK CARWARDINE**



PART FIVE

Rule of thirds

MENTION THE 'rule of thirds' to professional wildlife photographers and they will either nod knowingly or start ranting about the dangers of composition by numbers. Though it's a simple and effective way of creating a picture with harmonious balance – and it works surprisingly well a lot of the time – it's a rule that many photographers love to break.

Basically, in your mind's eye, you have to imagine two equally spaced vertical lines and two equally spaced horizontal lines that divide the image into nine equal parts. Then, when composing your shot, place important

elements (such as the horizon, a tree or an animal) along one of these lines or at one of the so-called 'power points' or 'visual hotspots' where they cross.

In particular, the rule of thirds is a great way of avoiding one of the biggest pitfalls in photographic composition: the near-overwhelming temptation to place your main subject slap-bang in the middle of the frame, which usually results in a dull and rather static picture. But, equally, breaking the rule of thirds – knowingly and courageously rather than by mistake – can result in striking and innovative compositions.

▲ **DOWN THE LINE**
By placing this Arctic ground squirrel off-centre using the rule of thirds, the animal has plenty of space to look into, there is little 'dead space' behind and the composition feels more comfortable.



Making visual sense of Mexico's monarch butterflies – numbering in their millions – requires forethought and no little skill to isolate one individual and anchor the shot.

1 FIND A SINGLE FOCUS

INGO ARNDT MONARCH BUTTERFLIES, MEXICO ◀



Ingo is an award-winning German photographer whose portfolio includes species from seven continents. www.ingoarndt.com

There have been many studies of how people view photographs and paintings. These reveal that our gaze tends to gravitate towards one of the four power points rather than to the centre of the frame. The middle of a picture is rarely a happy resting place for the eye; so if that's where you place your subject, your picture is likely to feel awkward, unbalanced and uninspiring.

Photographing clouds of monarch butterflies can be surprisingly difficult, because there is no obvious way of composing the picture using either the imaginary lines or the points of power. But Ingo has thought outside the box and captured a beautiful picture by focusing attention on a single butterfly.

"In this case," he says, "the rule of thirds works so well that the main subject doesn't even have to be sharp. Placing it on a power point balances the picture, while the blur suggests activity and movement."

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS 5D + EF 70–200mm f2.8 lens + 1.4x converter; 1/250 sec at f16; ISO 250



In this daring composition Pål has resisted the temptation to show the entire oystercatcher, instead placing its eye right on a power point in a bottom corner. One reason the picture works so well is the way he has used all of the space.

2 CREATE LIVE SPACE

PÅL HERMANSEN OYSTERCATCHER, NORWAY ▲



Norwegian Pål has worked as a nature photographer and writer for the past 40 years. <http://palhermansen.com>

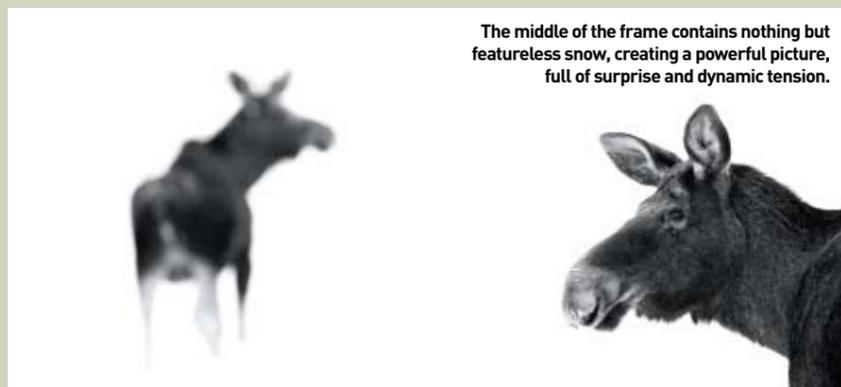
The rule of thirds has been guiding artists for centuries. But it's not simply a matter of plonking your subject on a point of power. There are other things to consider – in particular, how you use the rest of the frame.

One reason this picture works so well is the way in which Pål has used the space.

"Unless your subject is looking straight into the lens, it is usually best to leave space for it to gaze, fly, run or swim into the frame," he explains. "This is the live space. The space behind the subject tends to be dead space – though this isn't always the case: there may be an equally interesting subject behind that adds a whole new dynamic to the picture."

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1Ds + 28–300mm lens at 190mm; 1/160 sec at f20; ISO 200



The middle of the frame contains nothing but featureless snow, creating a powerful picture, full of surprise and dynamic tension.

3 DOUBLE UP

TOM SCHANDY NORWEGIAN ELKS IN SNOW ▲



Tom is a Norwegian author and photographer, and a member of the Wild Wonders of Europe photo project. www.tomschandy.no

First, identify your main subject. It doesn't matter whether it is an entire animal or just part of it (head or eyes, for example) so long as you place it on one of those imaginary intersecting lines or power points.

Tom has photographed not one but two subjects. "One elk is a recognisable shape but completely out of focus," he says, "while the other is sharp but largely hidden from view. So they both contradict and complement one another."

He has used the rule of thirds in an imaginative and abstract way: one animal falls on an intersecting line, while the eye of the other sits close to a power point.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1D Mark III + 300mm f2.8 lens; 1/400 sec at f2.8; ISO 400



With dramatic sky, cliffs and surf vying for attention, confident placement of the horizon on a 'thirds' line identifies the image's focus.

4 LET SEA OR SKY DOMINATE

GUY EDWARDES DANCING LEDGE, DORSET ◀



Guy is a professional landscape and nature photographer, and a member of the 2020VISION photo team. www.guyedwardes.com

The rule of thirds is particularly useful in landscape photography. It helps to avoid the temptation to put the horizon in the middle and divide the picture into two equal halves. Instead, divide it into thirds – one-third sky and two-thirds land or two-thirds sky and one-third land – and you'll usually achieve a much happier composition as a result. Which way round you do it depends on your subject.

Here, Guy has given this magnificent sea dominance. "The trick," he explains, "is to emphasise one or the other. You can draw attention to a dramatic sky, for example, by placing the horizon along the lower imaginary line. This makes the sky dominate the frame. But in this case I wanted to highlight the sea – all that movement and whitewater – so I placed the horizon along the higher imaginary line."

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS 5D Mark II + EF 16–35mm f2.8L II lens; 2 sec at f16; ISO 100; polarising/neutral density filters

BREAKING THE RULES

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



This carefully composed shot violates the 'rule of thirds' but triumphs because it captures the 'jizz' of these Arctic terns.

5 TAKE IT TO THE EDGE

DAVID TIPLING ARCTIC TERNS OVER FARNE ISLANDS ▲



David is a nature and outdoor photographer renowned for his images of birds.

www.davidthipling.com

As with all so-called rules of photography, the rule of thirds is only meant as a guideline. The trick is to know when to use it – and when to lose it.

David's dramatic picture of Arctic terns seems to break all of the rules of photographic composition. "The way you compose a picture," he says, "has a huge influence on how all of the various elements are perceived. Breaking the rules doesn't always work, of course, but it's

definitely worth experimenting to try to achieve something different."

The rule of thirds is designed to create a harmonious picture so, logically, it works particularly well if you actually want your picture to be harmonious. But what if you want to confound normal expectations and produce something more confrontational? Or if you simply want to illustrate a subject that's a little more chaotic? This is the time to push the boundaries. Try placing your point of interest at the extreme edge of the frame or, if you really want to tease and intrigue the viewer, have a go at hiding a significant part of it.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D2X + 10.5mm fisheye lens; 1/800 sec at f11; ISO 200

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

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

► REVISIT PAST EFFORTS

Experiment with some of your old digital shots, using the Crop tool to reframe them applying the rule of thirds, and see what impact it has.

► CENTRE OF SYMMETRY

Subjects that are themselves symmetrical rarely look good placed off-centre, so if you're photographing a round boulder or an egg, for example, it's best to try breaking the rule of thirds.



Radius Images/Alamy

Keep round subjects – like this boulder in New Zealand – central for a more pleasing composition.

► **SMALL SUBJECT? USE THE POWER** Composing your image to hit the power points is very effective when your main subject is small in the frame.

► **PLAY IT STRAIGHT – OR EXTREME** If you're going to break the rule of thirds, do it properly: be bold and daring to get the most striking effects.

TECH ZONE

CUSTOMISE YOUR VIEW: USE THE GRID

Many digital cameras have a menu option that enables you to add gridlines to the viewfinder display or the LCD screen. This helps you to remember and apply the rule of thirds – enabling you to see the lines and points of power – and has the added benefit of helping you to keep the horizon straight.

Meanwhile, if you are using autofocus, don't forget to keep moving the centre focusing rectangle (there is usually a dial or button to do this) rather than lazily leaving it in the 'bad' area in the middle of the frame.



Composite image

NOW YOU DO IT



Peter Cairns/northshots.com

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

DiscoverWildlife.com