



## PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART 18

# MAMMAL BEHAVIOUR



Though there are plenty of subjects to choose from, actually photographing mammals in action is a very exacting skill. Planning and patience are important, as is knowledge of your subject's behaviour – sometimes you have to predict what it's going to do next to capture the moment.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

**A CHARGING ELEPHANT**, fighting bears or a leaping squirrel – there are so many possible subjects this month. What's more, each one can be photographed umpteen times. A good mammal photographer can shoot the same species time and again, yet still return home with something new.

Autofocus lenses and motordrives have helped to push the boundaries in recent years, but they're only part of the equation. Too many mammal photographers, armed with the best equipment, shoot with no more than a wing and a prayer. They panic and use the 'scattergun approach', aiming in roughly the right direction and firing away as if they were in the Wild West. They take the odd great picture, more by luck than judgement, but few get consistently good results.

A considered approach, requiring intense preparation,

patience and concentration (as well as quicker reactions than Wild Bill Hickok) is much more satisfying and productive. You take great shots by working hard. And to be honest, they'll be even better if you work alone or with a fellow photographer. Capturing mammal behaviour is so time-consuming that non-photographers tend to get bored quicker than in almost any other field of photography. It's hard to be creative when you're feeling guilty for taking so long, and your companions are fidgeting and whispering.

But what makes it all such good fun is the element of surprise. No matter how much you practise or prepare, many of your best mammal behaviour shots will be of moments you hardly remember – because they happened so fast. These are the ones that make all that effort worthwhile.

▲ A young adult female bear tries to steal a salmon from a larger male. Fish were in short supply on this Alaskan river and some bears resorted to theft. This female was quickly put in her place. Jonathan and Angie Scott captured the violence of the battle in the muscular movements of the combatants, and also in the ferocity of the spray.





## MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

### JONATHAN & ANGIE SCOTT KENYA

Jonathan and Angie Scott have formed a prolific partnership for nearly two decades, working together in tv, art, wildlife photography, books and much more.



Jonathan and Angie Scott are passionate about wildlife photography. "We are both visual people," says Angie, "and thoroughly enjoy looking at art of any kind." "But it's not just enjoyable," says Jonathan. "It's essential. We make the time to look at everything from fashion to architectural photography, because it helps to keep our work fresh."

They don't like to criticise the work of other photographers. "We all have different styles," enthuses Angie, "and whether a particular style appeals or not, it is always enlightening."

"In fact, the two of us are very different in our approaches," says Jonathan. "Angie comes from a family of artists and is inventive and spontaneous. But I have a scientific background and can't help being more picky about carefully constructed compositions."

Japanese photographer Mitsuaki Iwago was a big influence on Jonathan, especially

**"I began to shoot as an artist, rather than as a scientist, and my photography improved."**

when he was first living in the Masai Mara in the late 1970s. "I was getting some good pictures," he says, "but more by default than anything else. I couldn't understand why

Iwago – a mere visitor to the Mara – was producing images that were so much more imaginative." Then it dawned. "I began to shoot as an artist, rather than a scientist, and my photography improved."

When we spoke, Jonathan and Angie were spending the weekend checking the proofs of their next book, *Antarctica: Journeys to a fragile Eden*. "It doesn't matter whether you are working in Antarctica, the Mara or in your own back garden," says Angie. "The challenges – and the immense satisfaction in getting that perfect shot – are the same."

## Jonathan and Angie's mammal behaviour photo tips

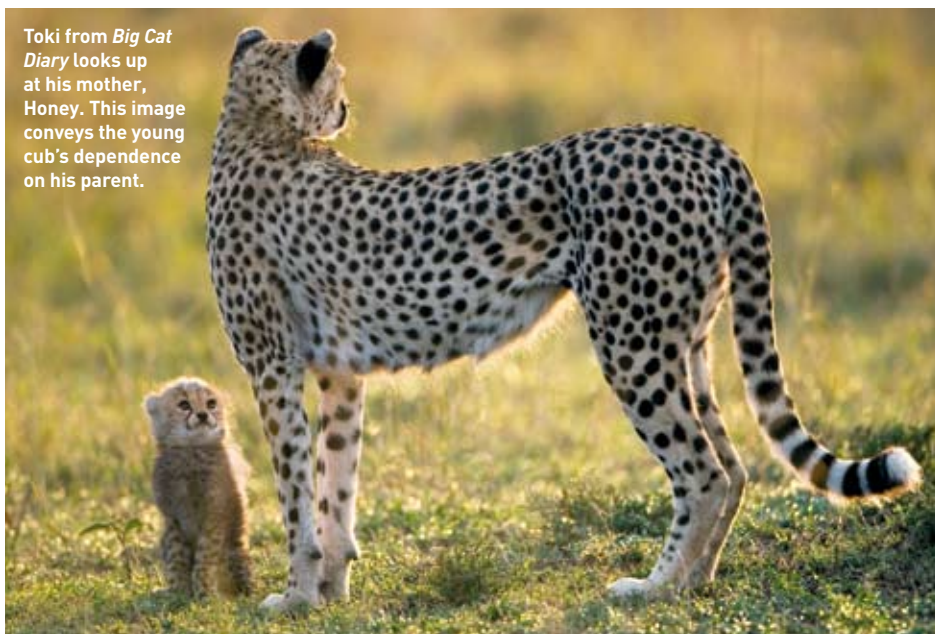
A fur seal uses its flippers to reach an itch, creating an abstract of fur and whiskers.



### 1 Be more imaginative and adventurous

To take outstanding pictures, you have to break the boundaries created by your own way of thinking and make your photography more adventurous. "A friend once said that he would put his head inside a shark's mouth to get the best shot," says Jonathan. "He was speaking metaphorically, but he had a point. Just don't overstep the mark."

Toki from *Big Cat Diary* looks up at his mother, Honey. This image conveys the young cub's dependence on his parent.



### 2 Be organised and plan ahead

So many pictures are missed due to lack of organisation. This begins with packing – Jonathan and Angie produce detailed lists of everything they might need – and continues into the field. "You may look a bit daft in a safari vest," says Angie, "but it does mean that everything is readily accessible and you can react quickly when the 'moment' happens."

## YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

### 1 ANTICIPATE THE ACTION



- » **Shoot first, ask questions later.** Don't wait until you have the perfect image in your viewfinder – the most dramatic mammal behaviour often begins and ends unexpectedly. If you stop to think, even for a second, you could miss the shot.
- » **Don't worry if you do miss** – just delete and try again. But do your deleting later, in case there is a repeat performance.
- » **Keep shooting** even if conditions aren't perfect – you never know what you might get. The more images you take, the better your chances of capturing a good one.

### 2 SHOOT FROM YOUR CAR



- » **Use your vehicle as a hide.** Many mammals don't associate vehicles with danger – yet if you get out of the car they'll be off. And in some parks and reserves, remaining in your car is mandatory.
- » **Hang a piece of camouflage netting** in the driver's window to break up your outline. Black out the passenger window, too, to hide your silhouette.
- » **Drive slowly into position** and turn off the engine just before you are ready to shoot. Many mammals will not hang around while you fiddle with your camera.

### 3 PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED



- » **Choose the right lens.** Mammal action often involves a flurry of movement, so select a lens that gives you lots of room around your subject. Otherwise you'll be cropping off snouts, horns and tails.
- » **Keep up with the action** by panning (following the subject with the camera). This technique is second-nature to sports photographers and requires practise, but gives a strong sense of motion.
- » **Experiment with slow shutter speeds** to get your main subject sharp and the background blurred. This requires a lot of trial and error, but can be very effective.

### 4 DO SOME RESEARCH



- » **Research your destination** and local conditions to increase your chances of being in the right place at the right time.
- » **Talk to local wardens** (who will be able to provide up-to-the-minute information on animal locations and behaviour), buy maps of the areas you plan to visit and read relevant books and articles.
- » **Spend time exploring an area.** You need to understand how it works and what happens there to identify the best photographic potential. Then patiently observe your subjects, looking for clues or mannerisms that may precede certain forms of behaviour.





ergorest.com

## ESSENTIAL KIT... WINDOW BRACKET

It's all very well using your car as a mobile hide, but how do you keep your camera steady? Resting a long lens on an open window is hit-and-miss and using a tripod almost impossible. The solution is a window bracket. This slips over the lowered window glass and is supported by an angled plate that rests against the car door. You simply tighten all the locking knobs and fix a normal tripod head to the top of the mount. The result is a rock-solid and manoeuvrable support that should keep all your pictures pin-sharp.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » **Mounting** – the bracket must be able to accept a standard tripod ball head that will provide smooth movement in all directions.
- » **Sturdiness** – it works best if it can be braced firmly against the door, making it stable even if you are using a long lens.
- » **Compactness** – it must be small enough to store and use in an inevitably cramped car interior.

### CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Brick-sized bean bag** – fill it up with beans, rice or even birdfood and use it to rest your camera on the car window. This is fine for photographing still subjects from a vehicle, but not so good if they are moving.

## DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO study art and photography** of any kind to keep your own work fresh and inspired.
- » **DO shoot like an artist** – but prepare like a scientist.
- » **DON'T forget to turn off the car engine** before you start taking pictures – or the juddering will make everything blurred.
- » **DON'T disrupt the behaviour** of the mammals you are trying to photograph – it may harm them and will certainly show in your pictures.

## MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



There is plenty of great mammal action to be seen in Britain. Here **Ben Hall** provides all the inspiration you need to catch them doing what they do best.

### Red squirrel climbing

The red squirrel's preferred habitat is pine woodland, so your first task will be to locate your subject. Squirrels move fast, but when climbing trees they often pause briefly to survey their surroundings. To capture this behaviour you need super-quick reactions. Follow the squirrel through the viewfinder and be ready to fire at all times.



### Mountain hare sprinting

I always like to express the spirit of my subject in my images. Mountain hares can move at an incredible pace, so try to capture this behaviour in an artistic way. Set a slow shutter speed on your camera and pan with the hare as it runs. This will create an abstract impression rather than a straightforward record shot.



### Roe deer leaping

Roe deer activity usually peaks during the rut in July and August. These shy mammals possess highly acute senses, so fieldcraft plays a big part in capturing successful images. Venture out at dawn and dusk when the deer are most active and always wear dark or camouflaged clothing. Approach from downwind and keep below the skyline.



### Grey seals playing

Grey seals are incredibly photogenic. For the most intimate shots, adopt a low viewpoint and use a beanbag for support. Seals often interact with each other, so watch out for signs of play behaviour. Set your camera to 'drive' mode and fire as many shots as you can to capture that perfect moment. Practise your skills at Donna Nook, Lincolnshire.



## MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use all our experts' hints and tips to take great photos of mammal behaviour. Use Ben's ideas for inspiration, though you don't have to photograph the same subjects. Upload up to eight images on our website and the winning shot will be published in *BBC Wildlife*.

### HOW TO ENTER

Log on to [www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com](http://www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com) and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Wed 4 July.

**RULES** 1) The contest is open to amateurs only. 2) Up to 8 entries per person. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the Summer special issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email. 8) Image file names must include your full name.



**'ZOO PHOTOGRAPHY' WINNER: STUART MACLAREN**  
This beautifully-framed image captures a moment that would be very hard to get in the wild. The slanting light picks out the gorilla's face and fingers perfectly.