

# How to be a professional wildlife photographer

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It's the dream job, isn't it? Being your own boss, travelling the world, spending quality time in some of the greatest wildernesses from Europe and Australasia to Africa and Asia, capturing prize-winning images of spectacular wildlife, and seeing your life's work in books, magazines, newspapers, calendars, and even exhibitions. You'll never have to commute again, never have to clock in at 9 o'clock every morning, wear a suit, be nice to your boss, or sit through another dreary meeting.

If only it were that easy. Apart from the harsh realities of running your own business (finding enough work in the first place, dealing with tax and VAT, chasing unpaid invoices, paying all your own office costs, etc etc) you have to get up at the crack of dawn to get the best light (much earlier than mere commuters) and kiss goodbye to all holiday and sick pay. Then there is the relentless challenge of editing, processing, captioning and archiving all those pictures – many professionals, who're taking something like 50,000-200,000 pictures a year, have a massive backlog. I daren't even tell you the size of my backlog (oh, alright then, at the last count I was 69 trips behind – that means I haven't even looked at the pictures from 69 trips, let alone edited, processed, captioned and archived them). So rest assured that the dream does not involve a life of continuous, daily photography – you will need to spend at least as much time behind a desk as in the field if you are going to do well. Succeeding as a professional wildlife photographer involves a lot of hard work: you need to be a great wildlife photographer *and* a whiz at marketing and business.

I don't want to put you off – I'm trying to help you achieve your dreams and ambitions – but I do want to open your eyes to some of the challenges and hurdles before you hand in your notice at work and jump on a plane with a bag full of spanking brand new camera gear. That's not to say that, one day, you won't be leaping on planes armed with the latest and greatest £6,000 cameras (you'll need at least two – always have a back-up) and £12,000 lenses. I'm a great believer in doing what you love and, if you have the skill, the passion and the right attitude, then perhaps you can make it as a professional wildlife photographer. After all, others have done – so why not you? It's certainly better to give it a go, even if you fail, than wonder 'what if?' later in life. But just make sure you have another source of income, until you're ready to take the plunge once-and-for-all, so you can still pay the mortgage if things go belly-up.

Also, it's important to bear in mind that, while many people call themselves professional wildlife photographers, not all of them really are. Some are, of course. These are well-established pros, who may have been in the business for decades, and they genuinely survive purely by taking pictures. But, to be honest, few earn a really good living that way. I know it's not about the money – it's about lifestyle and following a dream – but there's no denying that wildlife photography is a tough business. Chances are, you will have to make a lot of sacrifices (such as spending considerably more money on camera equipment than on mortgages or cars) along the way. Or marry someone rich.

Having said that, many more people (myself included) are semi-pros – they earn a significant part of their income from wildlife photography and the rest comes from writing books, running workshops, leading tours, giving lectures, and so on. More about all this later.

There are also growing numbers of people who have enough money from other sources to be able to take pictures full-time, though they rarely earn a living in the process (which is fine – because they don't need to – but they're not really professional wildlife photographers). So don't get the wrong impression about how easy it must be.

And remember – you'll be competing against all these people, and more (there are countless thousands of wildlife photographers who are technically competent and take outstandingly good pictures during evenings, weekends and holidays – just for fun).

Still keen? OK, so how should you go about it?

### **Should I get photographic qualifications?**

To succeed as a professional wildlife photographer you need to be technically competent – that goes almost without saying. But if you are planning to go freelance, in my view you are unlikely to need any qualifications, as such, simply because your pictures will have to speak for themselves (no one is going to buy a picture from you just because you have a certificate or even a degree – the picture has to be good, or at least be exactly what the client needs, for you to make a sale). Having said that, if you have the time and inclination, there are some outstandingly good courses available, ranging from casual evening classes to full-blown degrees, that can provide you with a good, solid grounding in photography – and that certainly won't do you any harm. It would be fun, too.

Alternatively, there are lots of places to get training and advice without compulsory exams at the end: one-day workshops (which can be technical or creative – I run them myself, sometimes, so keep checking the website for new dates) and wildlife photography holidays, or special one-day courses run by camera manufacturers such as Canon or Nikon (a great way to get to grips with all your equipment). You could also join a local camera club, which is an excellent way to hear talks by professionals and a great source of inspiration and honest feedback on your own pictures.

There is one avenue of study I would recommend – and you're not going to like it. It's certainly not what you've been dreaming about all these years. And that's business studies. You could be the best wildlife photographer on the planet, but if you can't run a business efficiently you simply won't succeed. So if you do opt for further studies, I would strongly recommend a course on how to run your own business. It doesn't have to be anything too fancy or overwhelming – evening classes would do perfectly well. Even a one-day course, to get you started. If you come from a business background already, all the better. Then you really can set out to earn a living, as a real professional, from what you love.

You should still work at improving your photography, of course. We can all learn and improve. With this in mind, I think there are two key ways of raising the bar of your picture-taking to an increasingly competitive level:

Practice, practice, practice. As the late great Henri Cartier-Bresson famously observed: ‘Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst’. It doesn’t matter what you photograph (it could be house sparrows, daisies, foxes or Sumatran tigers) as long as you do it often. The best way to get more creative is to photograph the same species or the same location time and time again – you get all the obvious shots fairly quickly and then force yourself to think outside the box to get something different.

Study other people’s photographs – every professional wildlife photographer I know delights in analysing other people’s pictures in competitions, exhibitions, newspapers, magazines and books. Flick through fairly quickly to see which pictures stand out, and then analyse why; and seek out pictures by the big names in wildlife photography and ask yourself what makes their work special. Learning from the work of others is crucial, but be careful not to copy them.

Just in case you’re wondering... I’ve never been on a photographic course in my life. However, I read every single book on wildlife photography ever published, attend lots of photography events, spend an inordinate amount of time studying other people’s pictures... and, over the years, I’ve been lucky enough to work with a great many established wildlife photographers. Hopefully, some of it has rubbed off.

### **The challenges ahead**

Not only is wildlife photography an extremely competitive and crowded business, there has never been a harder time to earn a living from it than now.

Traditionally, wildlife photographers used to submit their best images to picture agencies, or stock libraries, and the money would pour in while they were out in the field taking yet more pictures. The libraries took 50 per cent of the money from sales but, in return, did all the selling and administrative work. It was a simple numbers game – the more saleable images they had in the library the more money they made (a very rough equation ‘back in the day’ was an average income of £1 per year per image – so 50,000 images would result in an income of about £50,000). Those were definitely the good old days. And, sadly, they are no longer.

Now, while a very small number of wildlife photographers may manage to survive in this way alone (although I don’t know any myself) income from stock sales has plummeted. There are many reasons for this, including:

Better equipment enabling more people to take good pictures and so, suddenly, the world is awash with great photography. Alamy, for example, is a vast picture agency that will take any picture of any subject from anyone – and, the last time I looked, it had no fewer than 36.61 million images on its website.

Fees for wildlife images have dropped to an all-time low and, indeed, are some of the lowest in the entire stock-photography business. The perceived value of wildlife pictures is shocking – less than £1 per image is by no means uncommon – and many

enthusiasts will agree to anything just to see their pictures in print. This doesn't help anyone in the long-run and the result is a surfeit of pictures available very cheaply or even free – and all easily accessible online.

The fact that many small- and medium-sized stock agencies have been bought out by a small number of major players in the business, which now have quite a stranglehold on the marketplace.

The bottom line is that it's extremely difficult to earn enough money to survive through stock alone although, managed properly, it can still be an essential part of your income.

### **So what should I do?**

I've talked to many friends in the business about this. What is the solution? Not everyone agrees, of course, but the general consensus is that you should get your images noticed as much as possible – in any way you can – and then sell yourself, as the expert, rather than putting all the emphasis on selling the pictures themselves.

I'm not suggesting that you should give all your priceless images away for free, of course (though don't be mean – I give lots of pictures to my favourite wildlife charities). But I do think it is important to lower your expectations in terms of the amount of money you can earn from direct picture sales. Make as many picture sales as you possibly can and negotiate hard but, once you are established, expect to earn the bulk of your income from lectures, workshops, tours, articles and books. The people who survive – even do well – in this business are the ones with lots of irons in the fire. Personally, I have many different projects on the go at any one time, and many more in the pipeline.

Whatever you do, it's essential to be businesslike. And bear in mind the old adage: every day in the field costs money, while every day in the office earns money. Ask any professional wildlife photographer and they will tell you that they have to be strict with themselves and spend more time sitting behind their desks, editing and processing, writing and sending out proposals, contacting prospective clients etc, than sitting in a hide. It's a frustrating fact of a wildlife photographer's life. But it is a means to an end.

First, here are some ideas for selling your pictures:

Once you have built up a substantial body of good work, try approaching an agency. It's still worth it, even though the good old days of stock have long gone. I put my pictures into Getty Images, as well as two natural history specialists: Nature Picture Library (NPL) and Ardea (see the links page for direct access to their websites), as well as several abroad. But there are many others. Do a search online and pick one that best suits your pictures and requirements. Bear in mind that the bigger the agency the bigger the potential market, of course, but the more competition within the agency itself. Check to see if they have your subjects well covered already, because they are unlikely to take any more (unless they are particularly outstanding).

Send ideas to magazines and newspapers. Don't send a round-robin circular email – it'll get deleted immediately. Send a specific proposal to a specific editor or picture researcher (do plenty of research beforehand, to become familiar with the publication you are targeting). And bear in mind that, while there are plenty of great wildlife photographs about, there are surprisingly few original ideas. Come up with a great idea for an imaginative, timely story or portfolio, and you will be halfway there. Remember that monthly magazines are usually working at least three months in advance of publication, so you need to market your seasonal and topical photographs with this long lead-in time in mind.

Rather than sending lots of attachments, which can be annoying and may get removed by spam filters, I simply include a link to a portfolio of pictures on a 'hidden' page on my website. Whatever you do, don't hassle if there isn't an immediate reply. If you don't hear anything within a month, send a polite follow-up, and if you still do not hear back simply accept that, on this occasion, you did not have what they were looking for. Try again with a fresh idea another time.

Get a head start by developing a niche or unique selling point in your work that will give you some sort of edge. This could include anything from providing complete packages of pictures with words to unique in-depth coverage of a particular species, behaviour or place.

Consider other markets for your work: books, greetings cards, calendars and a vast range of alternative magazines (not just those specialising in wildlife or photography) for example, and trying selling prints to hang on the wall.

Don't undersell your images. As I've already pointed out, picture buyers are trying to push prices down all the time. But everything is negotiable. I have heard stories of wannabe photographers actually offering to pay magazines to use their images! That's ridiculous, of course, but once you've let your pictures go for a low price you'll make things harder for yourself (and your fellow photographers) in the future. Don't forget to specify the rights that you are selling (one-off use in a particular magazine, unlimited use for one year, UK edition of a book only, etc). And never sell your copyright in an image outright.

Second, here are some ideas for getting yourself better known as a wildlife photographer:

Set up a professional website. Selling your pictures is as much about successful marketing as it is about having brilliant images, and a good-looking website is a great start. It needs to be fast-loading, simple to navigate and smart. It also needs a simple and businesslike web address (ideally, just your name). If you can afford it, invest in an online, searchable database so that picture researchers can quickly find any one of your images simply by typing in the subject (have a look at mine on this website to get an idea of what's involved). A slick website will be the best investment you'll ever make.

Have some professional-looking business cards made, to dish out at lectures and events. I have mine made at [www.moo.com](http://www.moo.com) for a very reasonable price, they will

produce a batch of high-quality cards with a selection of your photographs on the back (and, no, they don't sponsor me!).

Attend major events, such as the Birdfair, to meet fellow wildlife photographers and to network.

Keep a portfolio of your work at the ready to show people your best work (iPads and other equivalent tablets are an excellent way of doing this). Edit the pictures ruthlessly so that you only include your very best shots. Less is definitely more in this instance – it's far better to show 10 absolutely stunners than the same 10 stunners along with a further 90 mediocre shots. The trick is to make an initial selection – ideally two or three times as many as you need – and then get other people to have a look, comment and even make the final selection for you. They don't have the emotional attachment that makes it so hard for you to separate the fun and challenging shots from the really good ones. It's also important to showcase the breadth of your work – different subjects, locations and camera techniques.

Enter competitions. Winning a competition is a great way to get noticed. A surprising number of professionals have built their careers on winning Wildlife Photographer of the Year, for example, since this is the standard everyone aspires to. But being able to say you have won any award will help to open doors (it may make an editor, who might otherwise delete your email, take a quick look). Read some of the articles I have written, on this website, about entering and winning Wildlife Photographer of the Year (I chaired the judging panel for seven years).

### **What should I shoot?**

Pick a subject. In a way, it doesn't matter what subjects you shoot, as long as you do it well. It's almost impossible to predict what is likely to sell and, surprisingly often, it's the least likely images that make the most money (one of my best-selling pictures is a shot of me whale-watching from my hotel bed in South Africa – and you can't even see the whale). Some species sell better than others, of course (tigers, elephants, penguins, dolphins etc) but many more people are photographing them – so there is much more competition and you will need to shoot them better than everyone else, or at least differently. Do some research to find out where the demand is likely to be in the future: the terrible decline of much British wildlife, from songbirds to hedgehogs, for example.

Bear in mind that it is easier to earn a living by shooting wildlife on your home patch than exotic wildlife further afield. The costs are significantly lower (no flights, for example) and there is more demand for the images (because home markets tend to want pictures of native wildlife more than any other).

Shoot stories. Try not to think in terms of single images. You're likely to sell more pictures if you shoot to tell a complete story. That might mean a portfolio telling the story of the return of the osprey to England, in-depth coverage of shark finning, a selection of behavioural (rather than simple portrait) shots of black rhinos, and so on.

Think commercially. Try to frame your pictures with commercial and editorial requirements in mind. This is the trick to making the most money out of stock. Shoot

verticals and horizontals, tight and wide, capture the whole animal, part of the animal, get its eyes looking straight into the barrel of the lens, looking to one side etc, to give end-users plenty of flexibility. They don't always buy the very best image – they buy the one that works on their particular page. For example, they might need lots of space and a clean background to allow room for a headline and a small area of text.

It should go without saying that you won't succeed financially if you shoot mediocre pictures (ordinary pictures of ordinary subjects presented in an ordinary manner – in other words, pictures that are similar in both content and quality to hundreds of other photographs that the picture editor has already seen). We all shoot plenty of mediocre pictures, of course, among the occasional prize-winners, but the trick is to hide them from the rest of the world – your reputation as a photographer is built on the images editors and everyone else sees. Therefore edit your pictures ruthlessly so that picture buyers only ever see images that are artfully composed, beautifully lit and informative. Then, and only then, will they remember your work. There's an old joke, from the days of slide film, that the difference between an amateur and a professional photographer is the size of the wastebasket next to the light table. By all means keep mediocre pictures that bring back happy memories, but put them in a special folder called 'Photographs to which I'm emotionally attached but which I'll never send to an editor'. Whatever your subject, study what other people have shot and aim to do something better.

I hope this has all helped. Good luck!

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