

# Photo Masterclass



**Perspective is everything: by choosing your position carefully you can increase the impact of your images and create unexpected new viewpoints – seeing your quarry through the eyes of another animal. It's time to get down and dirty...**

With wildlife photographer **MARK CARWARDINE**

New  
series



## PART TWO

# Get down low

**THERE IS A** saying among professional wildlife photographers that you're not taking great pictures unless you are lying down. Getting down low is a quick-fire way of improving your wildlife photography.

You don't take pictures of your family and friends from the top of a ladder, so why photograph plants and animals from an elevated point of view? When you're standing up, and looking down your nose at your subjects, you're not seeing them as equals and your backgrounds become little more than distracting dirt. But if you get down low magical things start to happen. Dropping just 1m can

completely change the mood of a picture – because you make yourself a more intimate part of nature, rather than simply an outside observer – and it will give your subjects more impact and dignity.

Shooting from a low viewpoint has other advantages, too. In particular, it helps to throw foregrounds and backgrounds out of focus (it's a great way of making the most of unflattering or dull surroundings, which are neatly rendered as pleasing, out-of-focus colour washes).

So our aim now is to break the habit of a lifetime: we're going to stop seeing everything from a human perspective.

### ▲ PLAY THE UNDERDOG

A coyote's-eye view of another coyote in Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico. The low viewpoint is more intimate than looking in from human height, and helps the viewer to feel part of the scene.





By lying on the ice to capture this shot of a harp seal pup, Kevin has boosted the immediacy of the encounter – you’re almost there with him.

## 1 TRY EYE LEVEL

KEVIN SCHAFER CANADIAN HARP SEAL



Kevin is an American photographer specialising in images of endangered wildlife. Read his Tale on p114. [www.kevinschafer.com](http://www.kevinschafer.com)

This evocative image is the next best thing to being on the ice with a newborn harp seal, photographed in the Gulf of St Lawrence, Canada. You’re down there with the pup, so you immediately feel part of the scene.

“The best wildlife pictures are almost invariably taken from the animal’s eye level,” says Kevin, “rather than from that of the photographer. I spent most of that day pretending to be a seal, lying down on the ice to make better eye contact with my subjects and to show more of the environment around them.”

You also get a better sense of place by getting down low. On this occasion, Kevin was rewarded with a stunning blue sky – and an unexpected reflection of the seal on the ice – neither of which would have been visible from a standing position. The other seals in the background would have been lost, too, if Kevin had shot from higher up.

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon F100 + 24–70mm lens; Fujichrome Velvia 50 film; 1/125 sec at f16

## 3 MAKE THE CONNECTION

TUI DE ROY CAMPBELL ALBATROSS AND CHICK



Tui grew up on the Galápagos Islands. Her photography takes her to some of the world’s most remote locations. [www.rovingtortoise.co.nz](http://www.rovingtortoise.co.nz)

There is an innate connection between the viewer and this Campbell albatross and its chick, simply because the photograph was taken at eye level. “Big albatross colonies can be terribly confusing to photograph,” says Tui. “The trick is to find a nest on the outskirts, then try to isolate a small part of the scene and get down low.”

In this instance, crouching down had two advantages. First, if Tui had stood up and towered over the birds, it would have frightened them. “Most animals don’t feel threatened by things smaller than themselves,” she observes.

Second, shooting from low down has also helped to control the background: the cloudy sky adds to the image and makes the two birds ‘pop’. If Tui had photographed them from standing height, the background would inevitably have been cluttered with other albatrosses, nests, grass and mud.

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon F3 + Nikkor 28–70mm lens; Fujichrome Provia 100F film; 1/250 sec at f8



Ensuring a clutter-free background allows room for the wheeling birds in the sky – the icing on the cake.



Getting right underneath these mushrooms on the edge of Dartmoor enabled Ross to capture an invertebrate’s-eye view and highlighted the delicate beauty of the fungus’ gills.

## 2 START AT GROUND ZERO

ROSS HODDINOTT FUNGUS GILLS FROM BELOW



Ross specialises in macro images of insects and wild plants. He was British Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2009. [www.rosshoddinott.co.uk](http://www.rosshoddinott.co.uk)

Ross has been delving deep into the world of mushrooms, looking for fresh ways to capture these familiar subjects.

“Taking this image involved lying in the mud,” says Ross, “and contorting my body to get right underneath the mushrooms

and compose the shot precisely as I wanted. It’s a great way of showing the beauty and design of their delicate gills.”

It was worth getting dirty for this unusual perspective, which mimics how invertebrates and small mammals see mushrooms – Ross’s photograph takes us into their secret world.

Notice how this viewpoint also distorts the mushrooms’ size: getting down low helps to give a relatively small subject big impact.

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D7 + 105mm macro lens; 4 sec at f22; ISO 200; tripod; reflector



Klaus had to be alert to both his subject’s mood – irritable – and the opportunity to capture this candid portrait.

## 4 SEIZE THE MOMENT

KLAUS NIGGE EUROPEAN BISON, POLAND



Klaus is a German photographer whose books have focused on bald eagles, bears, cranes and European bison. [www.nigge.com](http://www.nigge.com)

Getting down low is always at the forefront of a professional photographer’s mind, no matter what else is happening at the time.

Klaus spent ages trying to get close enough to photograph European bison in the primeval forests of Poland.

Eventually, he found a potential subject: this particular individual had been tempted close to human habitation by hay put out by local restaurateurs.

“The only problem,” explains Klaus, “was that this bison had a reputation for being quite aggressive and for charging

people. Sure enough, when I lay in the snow trying to take a low-perspective image, it ran at me and would have trampled me if I hadn’t managed to nip behind a tree.”

Klaus and the bison stalked each other around the trunk for about 15 minutes, much to the delight of a group of drunken tourists who were watching from the safety of a nearby bus.

“In the end, I stopped playing hide-and-seek, stuck my camera out at hip height and – without looking – took this portrait while the bison peered around the trunk.”

Shooting the photograph from just 1m lower than your normal standing height makes the bison appear even more formidable.

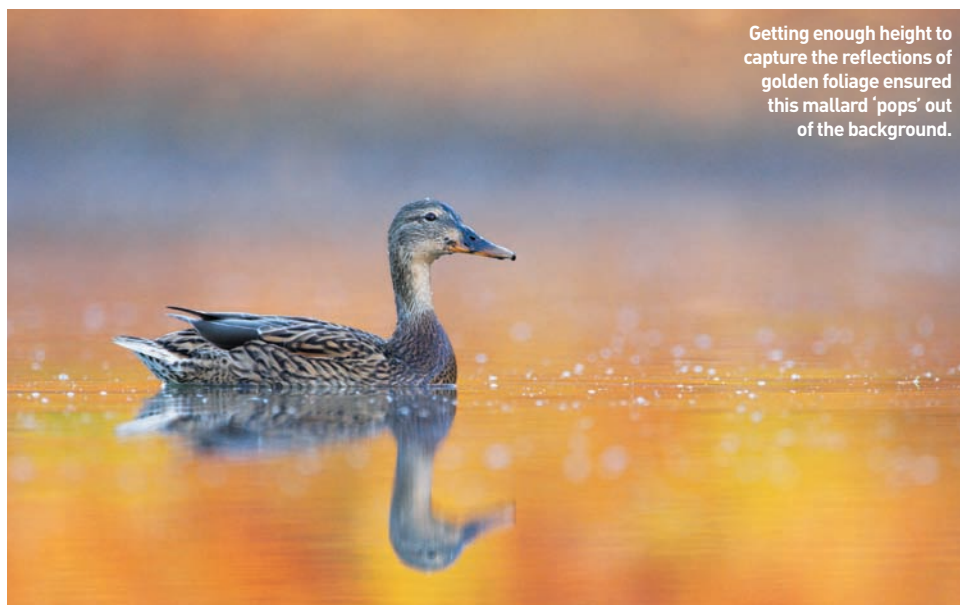
### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D100 + Nikkor 28–105mm f3.5–4.5 lens at 28mm; 1/320 sec at f3.5; ISO 250



## BREAKING THE RULES

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



Getting enough height to capture the reflections of golden foliage ensured this mallard 'pops' out of the background.

### 5 WHEN LOW IS LOW ENOUGH

MANUEL PRESTI ITALIAN MALLARD IN WINTER



Manuel is an Italian photographer who was named Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 2005.

[www.wildlifephotopresti.com](http://www.wildlifephotopresti.com)

Go to any public park and watch people taking photographs of mallards: most will be so close to the birds that they are almost standing on their webbed feet – and, inevitably, they'll be shooting from head height. Not Manuel, who took this evocative image of a common subject.

Manuel pulled back and got down low. But he didn't get down as low as he could have done. He hasn't exactly broken the rule, but he *has*

bent it. He shot from close to water level to add intimacy, but he didn't drop so low that he risked losing the gorgeous reflections of the bird and the surrounding foliage in the foreground.

"Everything comes together in this image," he says. "By lifting up a little from water level, I took advantage of the soft foreground and background colours, and turned the intriguing white spots on the water surface (from the seed pods of willow trees) into a feature that somehow enhances the mallard."

Like all 'rules' in wildlife photography, it's a matter of balance and fine-tuning.

#### TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1D Mark III + Canon 4/500mm lens + 1.4x extender; 1/200 sec at f6; ISO 2000; tripod

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

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

► **FEEL THE WIDTH** If you are able to get low and very close to your subject, try using a wide-angle lens to exaggerate size and perspective.

► **SAFETY FIRST** Be careful about getting down low when you're photographing large animals, in case it triggers an attack response.



Mark Carnivore

Know when not to drop down – predators such as this jaguar can take it as an invitation to attack.

► **THINK FEET** Keep an eye on your subject's feet, which are easy to cut off if you get too low. This isn't always a bad thing, but it is something to be aware of.

► **CARRY PROTECTION** Take a ground sheet so that you can get down into the wet and mud without being cold for the rest of the day (and throw in some inexpensive knee pads for added comfort).

## TECH ZONE

### HOLD STEADY: BAGS AND ANGLE FINDERS

Few tripods go low enough to let you lie on the ground, so you'll need another way to support your camera. Beanbags are good (if you're travelling, first empty the bag, then fill it with rice on arrival). Ground pods work well, too – flat-bottomed platforms on which you can mount your camera to steady and protect it.

Another useful bit of kit is an angle finder – like a periscope that fits over the eyepiece, it enables you to look through the lens without contorting your neck. If your camera has a tilting LCD, you may not need an angle finder.



Attaching an angle finder to your camera eyepiece makes framing in tricky spots easier.

## NOW YOU DO IT



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

DiscoverWildlife.com