

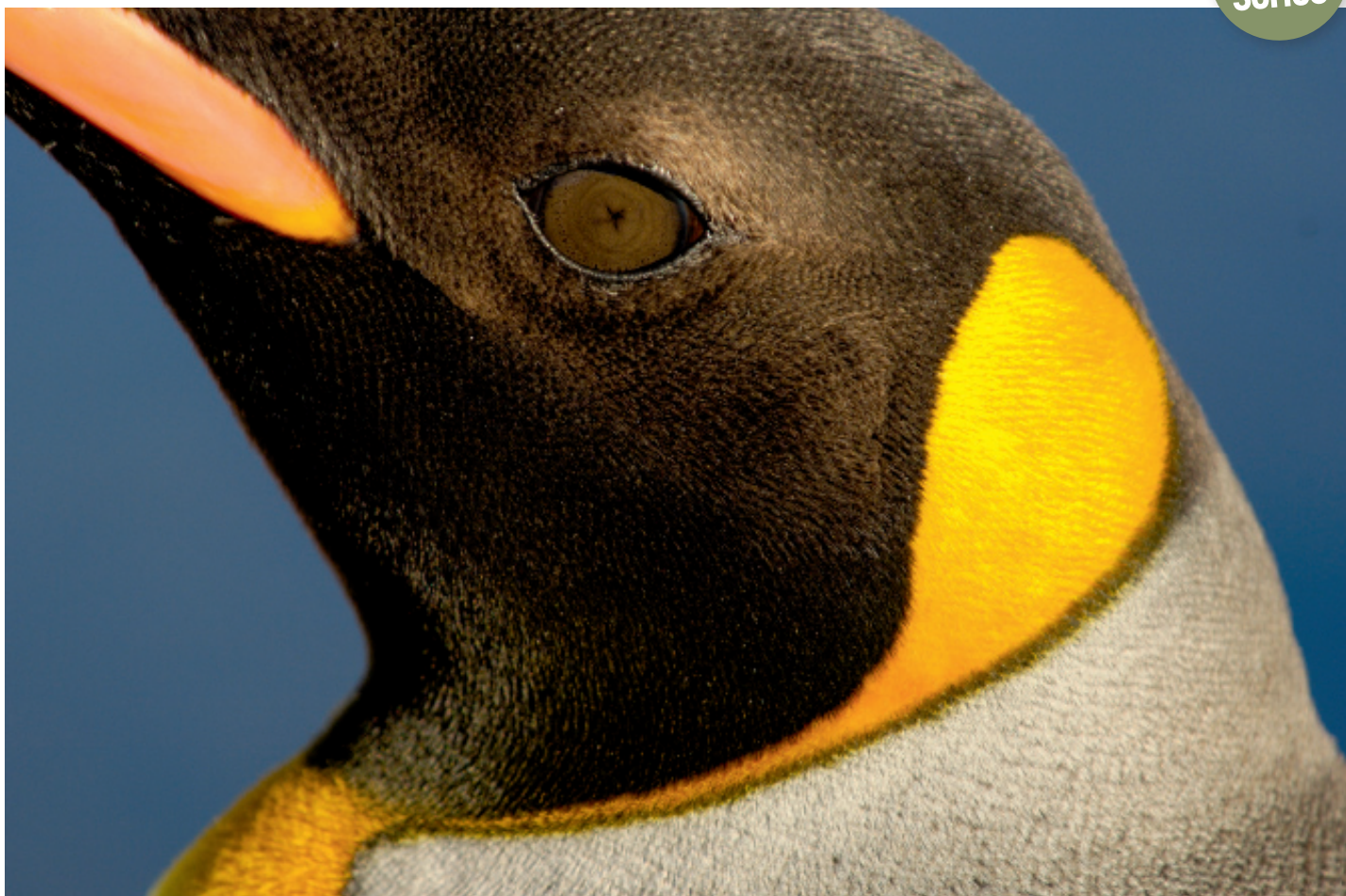
Photo Masterclass



Framing is a key skill for a wildlife photographer – it's vital to know when to crop in tight, what to leave out and when to embrace your subject's environment. Six pro photographers explain when to close in and when to be expansive.

With wildlife photographer **MARK CARWARDINE**

New
series



PART THREE

Shoot wide or tight

MOST PHOTOGRAPHERS have an almost overwhelming urge to fill the frame with their subject. It's understandable: if you've remortgaged the house to buy a really long lens, you want to get your money's worth. Besides, getting in close for truly intimate portraits is a sure way of grabbing the viewer's attention.

But up close and personal is not the only option. Some of the most memorable and powerful wildlife images ever taken include large tracts of long grass, rocks, sky, reflections, waves or whatever else happened to be surrounding the animal at the time. In fact, it doesn't

actually matter whether you get in really close or pull right back: there is potential for prize-winning shots either way.

The problem is that many pictures fall somewhere in between these two extremes, where the animal is small but not small enough or big but not big enough. They show a medium-sized blob bang in the middle of the frame that looks as if it were taken by accident.

So our aim this month is to avoid wildlife snapshots in this 'no-man's-land'. That means making conscious decisions – are we going to shoot wide or tight? – and then adjusting our composition to suit.

▲ ENSURE CLARITY OF VISION

It's important to make your intentions obvious: did you intend to shoot wide or tight? If the viewer understands the concept immediately, as with this picture of a king penguin on South Georgia, they tend to feel more 'comfortable'.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D2X + 70-200mm f2.8 lens; 1/800 sec at f6

1 EMPHASISE ENVIRONMENT

ANDY ROUSE SNOWY OWL IN WHITEOUT ▶



Andy is an award-winning writer, photographer and presenter. Read a review of his new book about gorillas on p85. www.andyrouse.co.uk

Pulling back is not an easy option for wildlife photographers. When the animal occupies a very small part of the frame, the trick is to use a clever combination of light and composition to make it draw your attention like a beacon.

That's exactly what Andy has done under difficult conditions in Arctic Canada, with this stylish and striking image of a snowy owl at one with its environment. Notice how he has placed the owl in the top left-hand corner, rather than in the middle of the frame, to achieve a more comfortable balance. There is astonishingly little in this picture and yet – because the owl isn't so small that it gets lost altogether – Andy has captured the essence of the bird and a real sense of wilderness.

“Shooting animals in their environment,” he says, “is not a fall-back option for when you can't get close enough to shoot frame-filling portraits. I was able to get surprisingly close to this snowy owl, but consciously went for something a little different.”

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D3X + 600mm lens; 1/600 sec at f4; ISO 400; Gitzo tripod

Framing this snowy owl adrift in an expanse of snowy whiteness emphasises rather than negates its habitat.



Photo Masterclass: Shoot wide or tight

3 CREATE A COMFORT ZONE

CHRIS GOMERSALL COMMON CRANE CLOSE-UP ▶



Chris is best known for his photos of birds – he was formerly the staff photographer of the RSPB. www.chrisgomersall.com

It is possible to shoot so tight that most of the animal disappears. But this only works if the cut-off points look intentional and natural: even extreme close-ups often need a little room to breathe around the edges.

Chris has captured a perfect moment with this intimate portrait of a common crane. Though most of his subject is out of sight, there is still sufficient space above and to the left of its head to make the picture feel ‘comfortable’.

“I wanted to get in really close to concentrate on the bird preening,” says Chris, “and that meant removing anything else that wasn't relevant – I also cropped the image further after scanning the slide. What's left in the frame is absolutely essential to the main purpose of the picture.”

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon F5 + AF-S Nikkor 500mm f4 lens; 1.4x teleconverter; 1/250 sec at f5.6; Fuji Provia 100F film



The eye of this common crane in Sweden is pin-sharp – crucial in frame-filling close-ups like this.

A shallow depth of field blows out the background of this family portrait, bringing softness to the scene.



2 CROP CLOSE FOR INTIMACY

SUZI ESZTERHAS BAT-EARED FOX FAMILY ◀



Suzi is an American photographer working mainly in Africa; her tale of raising a serval kitten was our May cover story. www.suzieszterhas.com

If ever a picture demanded the ‘shoot tight’ approach, this is it: a family of bat-eared foxes at the entrance to their den in the Masai Mara, Kenya. By removing everything but the most essential elements, Suzi has perfectly captured a delightfully tender scene.

She spent a total of three months sitting in her Jeep outside the den. “I didn't take a single picture for at least two weeks,” she says, “because it took that long for the ‘batties’ to get used to me. I started a long distance away and inched a little bit closer every day.”

Suzi shot tight to create a real feeling of intimacy. “The only way to achieve this was to cut off most of the adult fox,” she explains, “to ensure that the viewer's eye goes straight to the newborn pup and then moves to the watchful gaze of its father.”

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1D Mark II + 500mm lens; 1/320 sec at f7.1; ISO 640



Using a narrow depth of field reduces the background to an undistracting colour wash.



The hare is clearly the focal point here, but this image is strong because the subject is anchored in its environment.

4 BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

MARK HAMBLIN BROWN HARES NEAR AND FAR ◀



Scotland-based photographer Mark's blog about the 2020VISION project is at www.discoverwildlife.com. www.markhamblin.com

It is sometimes possible to shoot both wide and tight to get entirely different images.

Mark ably demonstrates the potential with these two pictures of brown hares: the same species, but poles apart in style and approach.

“When you're shooting animals in their environment [*left*],” he says, “the picture must convey a feeling of the relationship between the two. At the same time, you have to be careful not to lose the animal altogether: you need to use the light and the surroundings to make it really stand out. It's not as simple as throwing on a wide-angle lens and hoping for the best.”

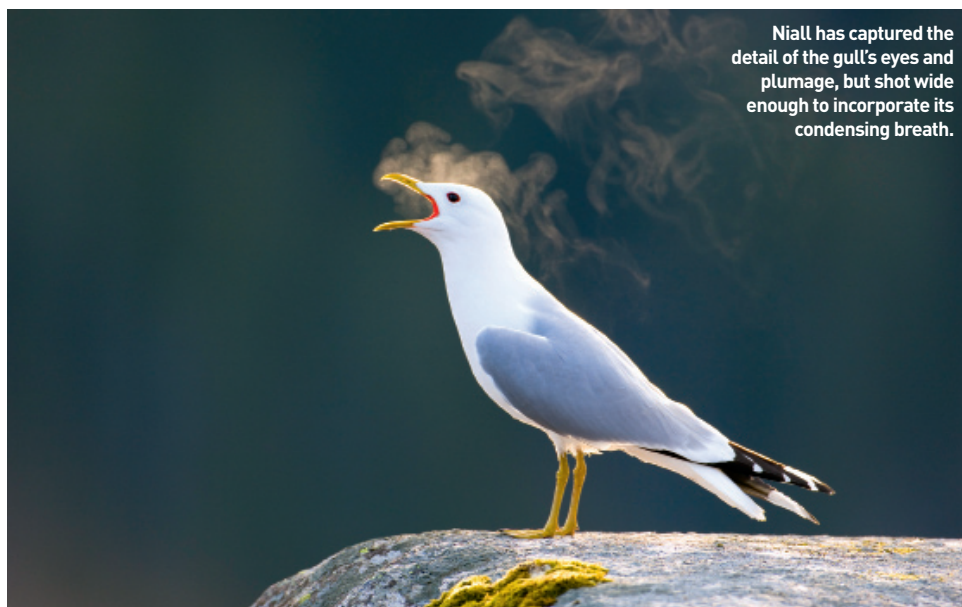
Composition is a little more straightforward for frame-filling portraits [*far left*]; here, though, it's important to make your subject ‘pop’ by isolating it from the background, as Mark has done by getting down low and using a narrow depth of field.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1D Mark II at 700mm (left)/500mm (right); 1/800 sec at f5.6; ISO 250

BREAKING THE RULES

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



Niall has captured the detail of the gull's eyes and plumage, but shot wide enough to incorporate its condensing breath.

5 LEAVE ROOM TO BREATHE

NIAL BENVIE VOCALISING COMMON GULL



Niall is a nature photographer based in Scotland, and is an organiser of the 2020VISION project.

www.imagesfromtheedge.com

Many successful wildlife photographers break the 'shoot wide or tight' rule by composing somewhere in the middle ground. But this only works if they understand the rules in the first place – otherwise, their subjects would be lost in that dreaded no-man's-land; anyone looking at their pictures would assume that they simply couldn't get close enough to fill the frame.

That's certainly not the case with Niall, who

took this evocative picture of a vocalising common gull early one morning in Norway. "It's important to look for elements that will positively add to a scene," he says. "In this case, I didn't want to zoom in too close because I felt it was important to leave plenty of space for the gull to call to the rest of the world." But of course what really lifts the picture to another level is the misty breath. Again, pulling back has given enough room for it to float across the frame.

Notice how the uncluttered background – and, in particular, the gorgeous backlighting – helps make the gull's breath instantly visible.

TECHNICAL SPECS

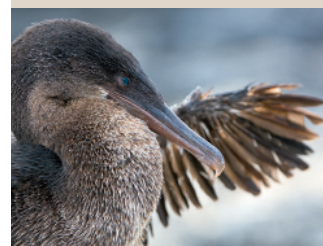
Nikon D2X + 500mm f4 lens;
1/160 sec at f5.6; ISO 200

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

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

► **GO WIDE FIRST** It's a good idea to shoot animals in their environment first. Once you're close enough to shoot frame-filling portraits, it's surprisingly hard to pull back.

► **LEARN FROM THE BEST** Study other people's photographs of animals in their environment to work out why some feel more balanced and natural than others. In particular, look for the position of the main subject and the way lines can lead your eye in.



Mark Carwardine

Composition is key to cropping close – don't lose key elements.

► **CROP CAREFULLY** Be careful not to crop your subject in awkward places (don't cut it off at the knee, for example).

► **LEAVE ROOM TO EDIT** Consider shooting a little wider than you are likely to need and then crop later in the computer, when you have more time to choose the best composition.

► **AVOID UNWANTED EXTRAS** Whether you're shooting wide or tight, do a quick 'border patrol' (check around the frame for anything that shouldn't be there).

TECH ZONE

ZOOM LENSES: YOUR FLEXIBLE FRIENDS

Zoom lenses enable you to switch from shooting wide to shooting tight in an instant, but cheaper zooms rarely have the optical quality of fixed focal-length lenses. As a general rule, the wider the zoom range the lower the image quality, though there are exceptions (Nikon's new 28–300mm is particularly good). A 70–200mm lens is standard issue for many professional wildlife photographers, but not all: Chris Gomersall always takes his AF-S Nikkor 200–400 f4 VR lens. "The perfect travel lens, it gives me scope for creative framing, and also focuses very close," he says.



NOW YOU DO IT



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

DiscoverWildlife.com

NEXT MONTH SEE THE LIGHT How to harness available light to illuminate your images