

Photo Masterclass



When it comes to light, less can be more – timing your photographic forays carefully and ensuring that illumination enriches rather than overpowers your images can result in photos that really shine.

With wildlife photographer **MARK CARWARDINE**



PART FOUR

See the light

LIGHT IS EVERYTHING in photography: it breathes life and depth into a picture. Subject, composition and background are all critical, of course, but it's light that can lift an image to a completely different level.

Put simply, there is good light and bad light. Good light brings true star quality to the mix, while bad light relegates your hard-won images to the 'didn't quite make it' file. Bright, overhead, harsh, midday light is particularly bad, because the sun saps colour from the picture (making it look sad and washed out) and hides all of the shadow detail. The bottom line is that, if you want to take great

pictures, showing up at lunchtime on a bright sunny day just won't cut it.

But the positive news is that there are many different kinds of good light: the 'sweet light' at the beginning and end of the day; bright, overcast illumination created when thin cloud cover acts as a huge diffuser; and even light in bad weather, with storm clouds, heavy rain, snow or fog. There are also many ways of using good light to achieve different effects.

So this month we'll be going back to the fundamentals of photography: learning the art of capturing light.

▲ **SOMEWHERE UNDER THE RAINBOW**
Bad weather often means good photography: the dark clouds of an approaching storm provide a dramatic backdrop for this southern white rhino in Kenya. The rainbow is the icing on the cake.

1 SHOOT INTO THE SUN

DANNY GREEN WADING REDSHANKS ▶



Leicestershire-based photographer Danny has a particular passion for seabirds and wildfowl.

www.dannygreenphotography.com

Shooting into the light can be tricky but, done well, it brings rich rewards. It works best during a dramatic sunrise or sunset and if the main subject has a distinctive and clearly recognisable shape.

Danny has used this technique to capture a striking silhouette in this wonderfully simple shot of redshanks at sunset in the Netherlands. “The trick,” he says, “is to keep your main subject away from any dark distractions so that it’s obvious what you are looking at. Take your exposure reading from the brightest part of the scene to produce a true silhouette, then experiment with a range of different exposures. Choosing the ‘right’ shot is very subjective – it’s all about capturing different moods.”

Shooting into the sun when it is low in the sky is also a great way to rim-light your subject (illuminating just the outline). Shoot against a dark background and try to get an orange or red ‘halo’ to make the animal glow. Rim-lighting works best with furry mammals.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1D Mark IV + 500mm lens + 1.4x converter; 1/1000 sec at f5.6; ISO 200



Last year’s volcanic eruption in Iceland caused glorious sunsets across the Dutch island of Texel, providing an intense background for these redshanks.

3 CLOUDS ENHANCE COLOUR

JOE CORNISH AUTUMN IN NEW ZEALAND ▶



Joe is renowned for his landscape photography, capturing the spirit of wild terrain, particularly in Britain.

www.joecornish.com

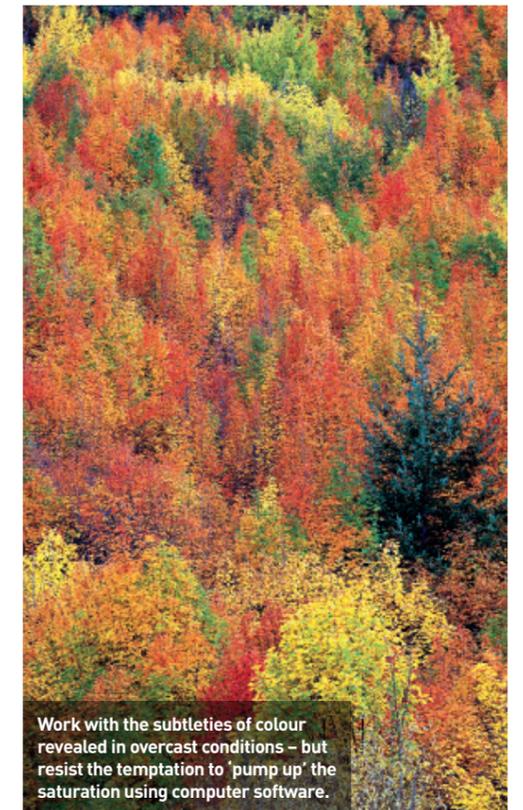
Light doesn’t have to be dramatic to be good: bright, overcast conditions can produce eye-catching results. Cloud cover acts as a giant diffuser, providing beautifully soft and even light. It renders maximum detail in fur, feathers and skin, without bright highlights or dark shadows, and allows the subtleties of colours to shine.

“Vegetation looks particularly good in this kind of light,” says Joe, who took this magnificent autumn scene near Arrowtown on New Zealand’s South Island. “By reducing the glare radiating from foliage, soft light can help to emphasise natural colour saturation.”

Shooting in overcast light is a delicate balance. If there is too much cloud cover, and the light is not quite bright enough, contrast disappears and images look horribly flat.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Ebony 455U + 500mm Nikkor-T lens; 1/8 sec at f16; Velvia ISO 150 film



Work with the subtleties of colour revealed in overcast conditions – but resist the temptation to ‘pump up’ the saturation using computer software.



Shooting early or late in the day imbues photos with warm colours and rich textures, as this early morning portrait of a cheetah illustrates. Avoiding the distracting harsh contrasts of midday eases exposure headaches, too.

2 AIM FOR DAWN OR DUSK

MIGUEL LASA SERENGETI CHEETAH ▲



Originally from Spain, Miguel lives in north-east England but has a global portfolio of wildlife images. www.miguellasa.com

The golden light of early morning and late afternoon – the ‘magic hours’ – is perfect for photography: it is rich in red and yellow hues, unlike the cool light of midday (which contains more blue).

These periods bring other advantages for wildlife photographers, as Miguel Lasa, who captured this delightful portrait of a cheetah, explains. “Early morning and late afternoon also happen to be when many animals are most active,” he says. “They are the perfect times to be out and about taking pictures, but there’s always a race against the clock to shoot before the sun gets too high or too low.”

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS 40D + Canon 500mm lens; 1/800 sec at f4; ISO 100



The snowflakes create a sense of depth in this portrait of a whooper swan, and the soft lighting gives both the scene and the subject a subtle luminosity.

4 EMBRACE BAD WEATHER

BEN HALL WHOOPER SWAN IN SNOW ▶



Ben’s photography focuses almost exclusively on the wildlife and landscapes of the British Isles.

www.benhallphotography.com

When the storm clouds gather, the temptation is to stay indoors. But that’s exactly when you should be out and about, because bad weather often makes good photography. You have to suffer for your art – rain and snow will add mood and drama to your images and help to make them more compelling.

Ben ventured out into the cold to capture this gorgeous, somewhat ethereal picture of a whooper swan at Martin Mere in Lancashire. “I love shooting in snow,” he says, “because it adds an extra dimension, a special quality, to the pictures. It also acts as a reflector, putting soft light into shaded areas and boosting light levels significantly even on quite gloomy days.”

Don’t forget to protect your camera from the elements with a rain cover (commercial or homemade) and keep checking the lens, ready to remove distracting spots of rain or snow.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1D Mark II + Canon 500mm lens; 1/200 sec at f4.5; ISO 250; beanbag

BREAKING THE RULES

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

Shooting this ox-eye daisy in the middle of the day – and using a polarising filter – boosted the vivid yellow and clean white, as well as providing a strong blue background.



5 WHEN BRIGHT IS ALRIGHT

PETER CAIRNS DAZZLING DAISY ▲



Peter is based in Scotland's Cairngorms, and is a co-founder of the 2020VISION project.

www.northshots.com

It is possible to take terrific pictures in bright sunlight, as Peter demonstrates with this eye-catching shot of an ox-eye daisy in the Cairngorms. It works so well because it is simple, graphic and, of course, dazzlingly colourful.

"I made the most of the sunshine by shooting the daisy against the deep blue sky," Peter explains, "and accentuated those gorgeous colours by using a polarising filter. Less is

definitely more in a picture like this, which is why I have cropped in tight to remove anything that might detract from the overall impact of the picture."

If you have to shoot in harsh sunshine, several professional tricks can make the results more pleasing. When photographing plants or small animals, try using a diffuser to create softer, more even lighting (a sheet of tissue paper or an envelope stiffener can often do the trick just as well as a commercial diffuser). Or use a reflector or a burst of flash to throw a bit of life into the featureless shadows. You can also use your own shadow to reduce contrast.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1Ds + 90mm macro lens; 1/40 sec at f11; ISO 50

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

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

► **TOY WITH ANGLES** Don't always play it safe and take conventional shots with the sun behind your shoulder. Front-lighting shows more detail in fur and feathers, and creates fewer shadows, but can make images look rather one-dimensional.

► **THE EYES HAVE IT** Remember to look for life-giving catch-lights in animals' eyes – this can give portraits that special spark.



Danny Green

A catch-light in your subject's eye can transform a shot of a familiar animal such as this fox cub.

► **WATCH FOR CHANGES** Notice how the impact of the light changes constantly, as an animal subject turns its head from one position to another.

► **MAKE YOUR OWN SHADE**

Always use a lens hood – especially when shooting towards the sun – to reduce flare. Alternatively, try holding a hand or hat over the top of the lens.

TECH ZONE

WHITE BALANCE: CORRECT THE COLOURS

Hidden away in the menu of most digital cameras is a function called 'white balance'. Using predefined or user-defined settings this removes unrealistic casts – caused by the varying colour temperatures of different sources of light – ensuring that white objects are rendered truly white in your photos. The presets in most modern cameras are pretty good so, unless you're shooting in very tricky conditions, it's usually okay to set the white balance to 'auto'. It makes one less thing to worry about (you can always tweak the colours on your computer afterwards).



Shooting in open shade at midday can give photos a blue cast (left) – set your camera's white balance to auto in order to ensure more natural tones (right).

NOW YOU DO IT



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

DiscoverWildlife.com