

Photo Masterclass



Hitting the shutter at the right instant can turn a good wildlife image into a great one. Being able to identify and capture unique moments – whether mid-scratch, mid-sneeze, mid-leap or mid-landing – will take your photography to the next level.

With wildlife photographer **MARK CARWARDINE**



PART SIX

Wait for the moment

IMAGINE TWO PHOTOGRAPHERS standing side by side, their cameras pointing at an African elephant (or a grey squirrel, for that matter). They're using identical equipment, their settings are the same and they release their shutters almost simultaneously. But the results are dramatically different. Why? Because only one of them captured the 'decisive moment'.

The decisive moment is that split-second when something is amplified or encapsulated in a single image. It conveys a feeling or captures climactic behaviour. The concept applies to all genres of photography – during the

recent royal wedding, for instance, it was the balcony kiss.

Henri Cartier-Bresson, renowned French photographer and father of modern photojournalism, was a big fan of 'the moment', as he called it. He believed that everything has one, and that it's fundamental to great picture-taking. "Photography is not like painting," he said. "There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture."

So this month we'll be making the most of the photographer's ability to freeze time. And we'll be mindful of Cartier-Bresson's warning: if you miss the moment, "it is gone forever".

▲ KEEP IT CLEAN

The decisive moment may be quite subtle. In this photograph of sandhill cranes, taken in New Mexico, it was the point at which there was no overlap between any of the birds, creating a clean composition.

1 ANTICIPATE THE ACTION

JASPER DOEST ARCTIC FOX CUB LEAPING



Jasper specialises in wildlife and conservation photography and lives in the Netherlands.

www.jasperdoest.com

You usually know when you have caught the decisive moment, as Jasper did when he took this fabulous picture of Arctic foxes in Svalbard. Not only is the cub in mid-air, but its paw has just hit its mother's face. If Jasper had released the shutter a split-second earlier – or later – he would have missed it.

“Sometimes you have to read subtle signals,” says Jasper, “such as a slight change in expression, a tightening of muscles or a sense of alertness, to get an inkling that action might be imminent. But often it's more a matter of getting to know your subjects by spending time with them. You can never really predict a great wildlife moment, but understanding your species intimately increases your chances.”

Anticipating an animal's next move is just a part – albeit a crucial one – of great picture-taking. As Jasper demonstrates, the trick is to do it with terrific composition and wonderful light. A lot of things have to fall into place.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D3 + Nikkor AF-S 500mm f4 lens;
1/1000 sec at f8; ISO 1250



An Arctic fox cub jumps up and pats its mother's nose. The female barely has time to blink, her unmoving pose perfectly complementing the sprightly youngster.

3 BE DECISIVE

BEN HALL LONG-TAILED TIT LANDING



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

www.benhallphotography.com

Everything is just right – you've found a suitable spot, your subjects are nearby, the light is gorgeous and you're in position, waiting patiently. Only one thing can ruin your pictures now – indecisiveness.

“You may have to sit in a hide for hours or even days waiting for the perfect moment,” says Ben, who took this delightful image of long-tailed tits. “There aren't many perfect moments, so you can't afford to miss them. You have to be ready to start shooting as quickly as possible, and there is no time to hesitate or the opportunity will have gone.”

This is one of the great advantages of digital photography – you can take the risk and start firing. If it wasn't the decisive moment after all, there's nothing lost; if it was, you've captured it for all to see.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1D Mark II + 100–400mm lens;
1/320 sec at f5.6; ISO 100

Photo Masterclass Wait for the moment



Never waver if conditions are right – don't fall prey to indecision.

2 BE A PHOTO 'GUNSLINGER'

KEVIN SCHAFER GREEN TURTLE DIGGING



Kevin is an American photographer who specialises in taking images of endangered wildlife.

www.kevinschafer.com

It is no accident that great photographers take a lot of images. They develop swift reactions and a kind of intuition that soon becomes almost subconscious. If they were gunslingers, then they would be among the quickest on the draw.

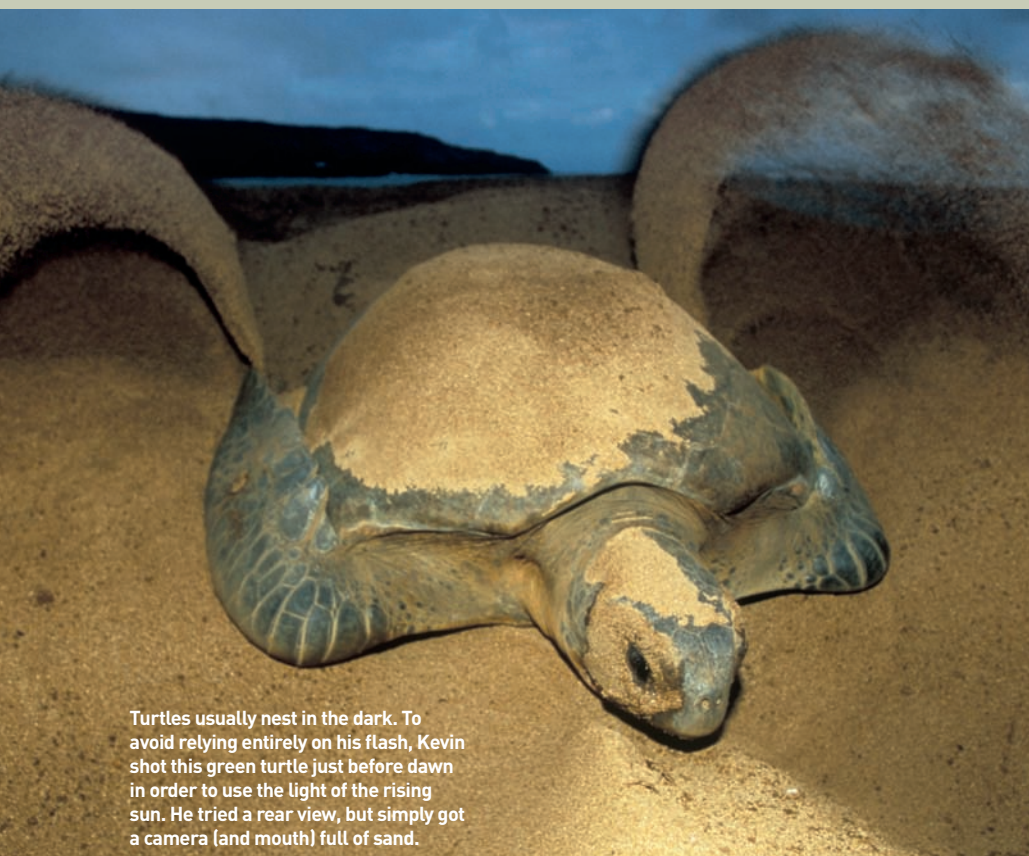
You can teach yourself to be a photographic gunslinger. The trick is to see the moment approaching, by careful observation, then try to predict exactly when to trip the shutter.

This is what Kevin did on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. “I was watching this green turtle excavating a nest on its breeding beach, and I noticed the wonderful shapes formed by the displaced sand,” he says. “It was just a matter of timing and taking lots of pictures to capture two parallel arcs.”

It's a perfect decisive moment: a split-second in a sequence of events that sums it all up.

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon F100 + 17–35mm lens; Fuji Velvia film; flash



Turtles usually nest in the dark. To avoid relying entirely on his flash, Kevin shot this green turtle just before dawn in order to use the light of the rising sun. He tried a rear view, but simply got a camera (and mouth) full of sand.

Defining moments can be found even while shooting commonly photographed wildlife. Spend enough time watching and you will see artistry in the ordinary.



4 PERFECT YOUR TIMING

MALCOLM SCHUYL MUTE SWANS COURTING



Malcolm is based in Oxfordshire but photographs wildlife both above and below the water all over the world.

www.wildvisions.co.uk

Capturing the decisive moment makes viewers want to linger and take a closer look. It lifts your images to another level. But it's easier said than done – especially with subjects that have been widely covered.

Malcolm has been photographing mute swans for a new book. “The birds are so accessible that it's not hard to get decent shots,” he says. “The challenge is to take something exceptional, and that is often down to timing.”

Watching this pair's courtship dance, Malcolm realised that there was a brief moment when their heads came together in a heart shape. “That was the split-second I wanted,” he says. “The trick was to shoot first and ask questions later. As soon as the display moved towards the ‘heart’, I started firing. This was the only image in the sequence that captured exactly what I had in my mind's eye.”

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D2X + 200–400mm VR lens;
1/1250 sec at f8; ISO 200

BREAKING THE RULES

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

If the action is not forthcoming, look for other ways to create a unique image. Unexpected weather conditions, for instance, can portray a species in a completely new way.



5 IF THE MOMENT NEVER COMES

ANDY ROUSE RED SQUIRREL IN SLEET



Andy is an award-winning writer, wildlife photographer and presenter who lives in Cardiff.

www.andyrouse.co.uk

The concept of the decisive moment is absolutely sound. Waiting for your subject to do something – cock its head, scratch, stretch, call, jump – often makes for a more dynamic image.

But that's not always the case, as Andy's evocative picture of a red squirrel beautifully demonstrates. This is a classic example of bad weather making good photography. Andy has transformed a simple portrait of a squirrel in

hard sleet into an absolute corker, even without an archetypal decisive moment.

No matter how long you hang around, some animals seem intent on doing absolutely nothing. "The temptation may be to try and coax an animal into doing something, such as flushing a bird to make it fly," says Andy. "But this is a bad idea for several reasons. First, you don't always need a perfect moment to get a great shot; second, you might miss other interesting behaviour (such as preening or yawning) before the bird takes flight of its own accord; and thirdly – and most importantly – it's unfair to disturb it at all."

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II + 300mm lens + 1.4x teleconverter; 1/50 sec at f2.8; ISO 250

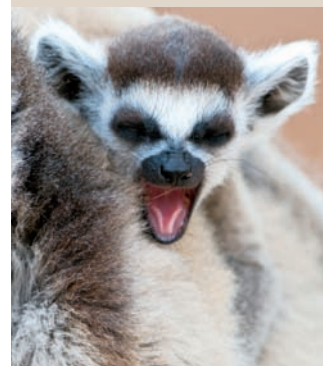
TRICKS OF THE TRADE

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

► REMEMBER TO RELEASE

Don't just hold the shutter button down and hope for the best – if you fill the camera's internal memory buffer it will lock at the crucial moment. It's usually better to shoot in short bursts.

► **NO PRODDING** Never prompt an animal to perform for you. Be patient and wait for the moment to occur naturally.



Mark Carwardine

Firing as soon as this baby ring-tailed lemur started to yawn captured this decisive moment.

► **BE VIGILANT** The best shots often present themselves when you least expect it. Make sure that your camera is switched on all the time and that you are ready to swing into action as soon as an opportunity presents itself.

► **CHECK YOUR SETTINGS** Keep your camera on a high shutter speed (say, 1/1000 second) to freeze the moment when it does eventually happen.

TECH ZONE

SWITCH TO MANUAL: READ, LEARN, PRACTISE

A well-heeled friend recently commented: "My decisive moment was shelling out £5,000 on a new camera." That's great – but only if he learns how it works. It's all very well having a blisteringly fast autofocus system, for example, but it's as good as useless if you don't understand how it operates or the best way to use it. You can't afford to waste time fumbling with mysterious camera settings at the crucial moment. Read the instructions at home, not in the field, and practise until your camera feels like a natural extension of your hands.



Don't waste decisive moments figuring out how to work your camera.

NOW YOU DO IT



Craig Jones

Read previous Photo Masterclass tips and admire stunning picture galleries, including Craig Jones' shots of British wildlife (above), at

 **DiscoverWildlife.com**

NEXT MONTH HOLD STEADY Gear and techniques for achieving pin-sharp perfection