



PHOTO MASTERCLASS

PART 7: HOLD STEADY



A pin-sharp finish is fundamental to great nature photography. Crisp images have a mesmerising immediacy, enticing the viewer to linger over every feather, scale and hair, says wildlife photographer **Mark Carwardine**.

Iwould rather go on a shoot without my trousers than without a tripod. Okay – maybe that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but it’s a good principle nonetheless. One of the greatest challenges in nature photography is getting your images pin-sharp – more pictures are ruined by a lack of clarity than almost anything else.

One major problem is a general hatred of tripods. Important as they are, they can be excessively heavy, awkward to carry and as difficult to put up as deck chairs, while cheaper models have a habit of crushing your fingers and collapsing, bringing your precious camera gear down with them. An unruly tripod can turn wildlife

photography from a pleasure into a test of endurance.

But despite all the recent advances in digital photography, none has yet solved the need for actually holding a camera steady. The good news is that nowadays there are some excellent, sturdy, lightweight tripods available, and if you bother to use one, you will dramatically increase the number of pictures that make the cut. This in turn will make you a more confident photographer.

There are also other ways of keeping your camera still, ranging from beanbags and fenceposts to good old-fashioned technique. So, this month we’ll be introducing a few tricks of the trade to sharpen up your shots.

▲ **STAY FOCUSED**
Sharpness is achieved by good technique – don’t let the high ISO capabilities of modern cameras, or lenses’ vibration reduction or image stabilisation, make you sloppy.

1 THREE IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

LEE FROST UK



Landscape photography demands the use of a tripod even more than most other genres.

"Tripods are crucial for several reasons," says Lee. "As well as keeping camera shake to an absolute minimum (even when using small apertures and slow shutter speeds), they force you to slow down and compose carefully. Once I've set up my tripod, I often make small adjustments until I'm completely satisfied."

Sometimes, though, merely using a tripod isn't enough, especially if it's windy. You can maximise sharpness by keeping

Use a tripod and long exposure to create the effect of flowing water in a sharp landscape, as in Lee's portrait of Buachaille Etive Mor, Scotland.

the tripod as low as possible and leaving the central column unextended. If conditions are particularly bad, place a beanbag on top of the camera and lens or hang your bag underneath to add stability. A cable release or the self-timer will also keep shaky fingers away from the camera.

A one-legged monopod may be lighter and useful in certain situations (such as stalking animals in thick undergrowth), but is very much second-best. It lacks the stability of a sturdy tripod, and you can't set it up and leave it while you wait for the decisive moment.

► www.leefrost.co.uk

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III + 21mm lens; 1.3 sec at f22; ISO 100; polarising filter



2 GET CLOSE, GET CLOSER

JORDI CHIAS SPAIN



Taking sharp images underwater is particularly challenging, partly

because you can't use tripods or cable releases, but mainly because you're shooting through a medium that makes everything look soft.

"The trick," says Jordi, "is to get close... and then get even closer. The less water you shoot through, the sharper your images will be."

Wherever you are shooting, your choice of lens makes a big difference, too. As a general rule, spend less on your camera and as much as you can afford on your lens. Lenses with vibration reduction or image stabilisation can also help to keep hand-held pictures sharp. And think about your aperture: lenses have a 'sweet spot' (usually f8 or f11, or two stops smaller than wide open) at which sharpness is at its best.

► www.uwaterphoto.com

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS 5D + 15mm lens; 1/80 sec at f16; ISO 100; strobes; underwater housing



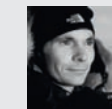
To achieve crystal-clear images underwater, such as Jordi's green turtle in French Polynesia, use a wide-angle lens and approach within 1m. Telephoto lenses are a big no-no.



The sharpest part of a picture doesn't have to be central – in fact, placing the focal point in the corner, as with this tiger's eye, can increase the shot's impact.

3 THINK OF ALTERNATIVES

THORSTEN MILSE GERMANY



Thorsten took this captivating picture of a tiger while riding an elephant in India's

Bandhavgarh National Park. When you're trying to keep your pictures sharp, this is as tricky as it gets.

He often works from vehicles, too, where space constraints make it impossible to use a tripod. But there are alternatives. The first is a window-mount, which clamps over the open window. The second is a brick-sized beanbag. You travel with it empty, then fill it with dried beans or rice when you reach your destination.

"Used properly," says Thorsten, "a beanbag can be at least as stable as a tripod. It supports a lens along most of its length, rather than at one point."

► www.wildlifephotography.de

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II + 300mm lens; 1/125 sec at f5.6; ISO 400

4 WHEN TIMES ARE ROUGH

CHRIS GOMERSALL UK



Chris snapped this short-beaked common dolphin in Scotland's Loch Torridon.

"Shooting from small boats can be tricky," he says, "as you can't use a tripod or beanbag. I was lucky here, because the sea was calm, but you are often thrown all over the place."

It can be great fun taking pictures without the restrictions of a tripod – you can react more quickly and work more fluidly. But you still need sharp images.

There are several tricks. First, if the engine isn't causing the vessel to vibrate, lean against something to support yourself. Second, use a shutter speed that is higher than the number of the focal length of your lens (so if you're using a 300mm lens, strive for a shutter speed of at least 1/500 sec). Then keep your elbows in, hold your breath and hope for the best.

► www.chrisgomersall.com



TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D3 + 70-200mm lens; 1/3200 sec at f5.6; ISO 800

To capture a dolphin in mid-air, you need to anticipate where the animal is going to emerge by following it underwater while looking through your lens.

BREAKING THE RULES

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



If you're going for an exciting action shot, a blurred finish can add edge and impact.

5 BLURRING THE LINES

EDWIN GIESBERS NETHERLANDS



A lack of sharpness through incompetence or laziness can ruin a good picture. But if you know what you are doing, a bit of blur can turn an average image into an outstanding one.

Take Edwin's photo of a red fox. It's obvious that the softness was intentional – in fact, it's almost as important to the success of the picture as the fox itself.

"Sometimes," says Edwin, "when you freeze a moment in time by shooting a moving subject with a fast shutter speed, you lose that sense of movement. In this image, by selecting a slower shutter speed and panning with the running fox, I've added an element of drama to the scene. Panning is important because it blurs the background more than the animal itself."

There is no magic shutter speed when taking slow-motion shots, but start with 1/15 sec and work from there. This is one of the great advantages of digital photography

– you can play around and learn from your mistakes while you're out in the field.

Obviously, there is little time to experiment when a wild fox is running past, so persuade your friends and family (small children are usually willing) to scamper backwards and forwards in front of the camera and practise on them.

► www.edwingiesbers.com

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D300 + 50–500mm lens; 1/15 sec at f22; ISO 400

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

► LET BAD IMAGES LIE

Sharpening digital images on the computer can make them crisper, but you can't make a soft image miraculously sharp.

► SCRUTINISE ON SCREEN

Check the sharpness of your images on a computer at 100 per cent magnification. With something like a walrus (below), inspect every whisker.



Mark Carwardine

► CHECK YOUR TECHS

Turn the image stabilisation off when using a tripod. If a camera is still, there is a small chance it could add blur.

► GET CONNECTED

Attach long lenses to the tripod via their tripod collar. If you attach the camera, the weight of the lens may damage the lens mount.

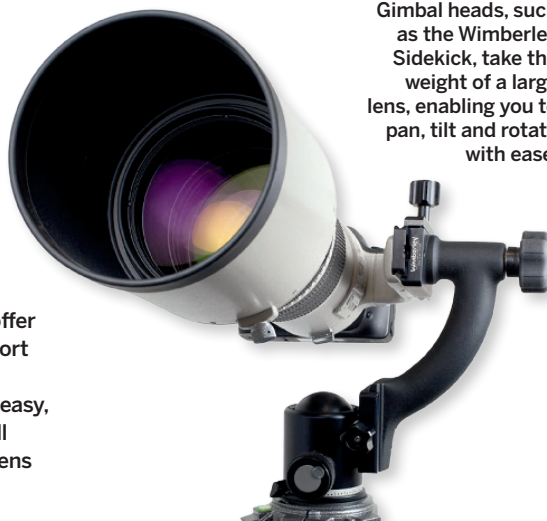
BUYING A TRIPOD: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

tech zone

A good tripod is one of the most important accessories you will ever own. When purchasing one, consider: **Weight** – heavier usually means sturdier, though the modern carbon-fibre models used by most professionals are sturdy and relatively light.

Legs – these must be easy to extend and adjust, offer a comfortable maximum working height and support your camera down to ground level.

Head – You need a high-quality head that provides easy, smooth movements in all directions. Consider a ball head, a gimbal head (which puts the weight of the lens and camera below the pivot point) or a video head.



Gimbal heads, such as the Wimberley Sidekick, take the weight of a large lens, enabling you to pan, tilt and rotate with ease.

NOW YOU DO IT



Neil Aldridge

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NEXT MONTH THE ART OF COMPOSITION How to put a picture together