PHOTO MASTERCLASS

PART 8: THE ART OF COMPOSITION

There are always new ways to present wildlife subjects. Be creative in your approach to each and every image and you'll discover a new world of photographic potential, says wildlife photographer Mark Carwardine.

Have a look at all of the photographs you've taken in the past year and evaluate how much the pace varies from one picture to another. Do you see a range of inspiringly different styles and techniques? Or do the shots feel quite repetitive and samey? If there's too little variety, you're probably not taking advantage of the infinite number of ways of photographing the natural world.

We've already looked at several techniques for improving composition – such as keeping it simple (April), getting down low (May) and the rule of thirds (August) – but it's also important to know how to pull together all of the component parts of a picture into a rhythmic whole.

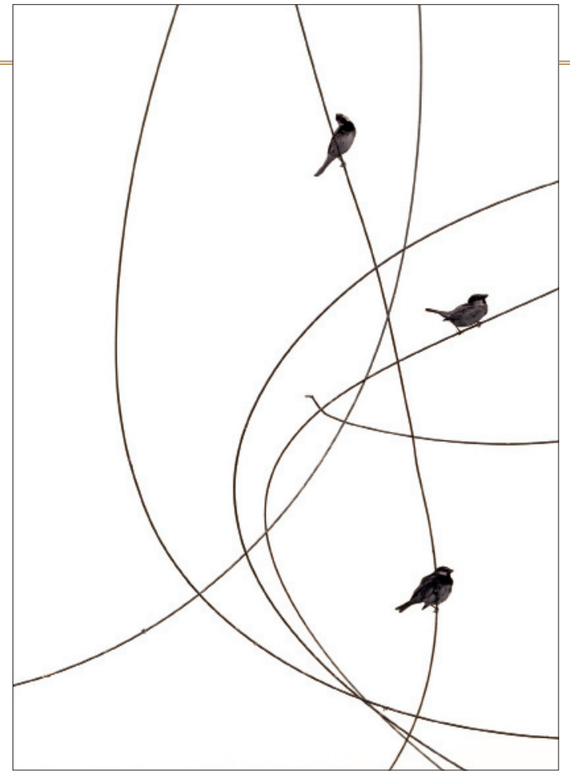
There are two great ways of learning this art of composition. First, immerse yourself in wildlife imagery – pore over books and magazines, browse websites, attend lectures and visit exhibitions – and analyse why some pictures stand out more than others.

Second, take as many photographs of the same subject as you can, experimenting with different angles, lenses, lighting, positions and techniques, to explore all of the creative possibilities on offer.

This month we'll be learning how everything in the natural world can be photographed in an infinite number of ways and, in the process, we'll be making our pictures more varied.

▲ BE ORIGINAL
To achieve something different, take the time to experiment – crouching down low and intentionally obscuring this Sumatran rhino with blades of grass provided a more unusual perspective.

Mark Carwardine



Like scribbles with a pen, the overlapping loops of broken wire create a variety of eye-catching shapes. The white background completes the abstract feel.

1 GO VERTICAL; LOOK FOR LINES

JAN-PETER LAHALL SWEDEN

There are many reasons why Jan-Peter's striking picture of Spanish sparrows works so well: the composition is simple and has plenty of room to breathe, the curved wires form a wonderfully graphic backdrop and the vertical format suits the image perfectly.

"There is a tendency for people to shoot horizontals," says Jan-Peter, "because cameras are designed to be used most easily that way. You have to make a special effort to switch to vertical, but you should always try it as a matter of course."

The lines in this picture are particularly striking. Our eyes are naturally drawn along lines, which, consequently, can make or break a composition. Diagonals tend to work better than verticals or horizontals; snaking lines can meander to the focal point and draw us in; leading lines (for example, a path crossing a field) can create a sense of depth and expectation; and, as in this case, sinuous lines can take us on a journey through the scene.

Once you start noticing lines and the patterns that they form in nature, you'll see them absolutely everywhere.

▶ *www.lahall.com*

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III + 300mm lens; 4/400 sec at f1.8; ISO 125

Laurie's close-up of a web is a fresh look at a common subject. The emphasis here is on the delicacy of the dewdrops, which festoon the threads like rows of glass beads.

2 THINK ABOUT ARTISTRY

LAURIE CAMPBELL UK

We all have unique ways of interpreting a scene and arranging the various elements within a frame. With practice and a little artistic flair, finding the most striking composition can become almost intuitive.

A spider's web, for example, can be photographed in many different ways. An amateur snap might show the web in its entirety with a confusing and cluttered background. But just look at Laurie Campbell's wonderfully creative interpretation.

"Shooting only part of the web focuses the viewer's attention on the silken threads," says Laurie, "while making the background dark ensures that they all stand out. I also took the picture from a low angle, which makes the lines converge to achieve a feeling of depth and distance."

▶ *www.lauriecampbell.com*

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D3X + 200mm macro lens; 1/100 sec at f7.1; ISO 100

Different shapes convey different feelings (eg smooth and round infers calm). Here, the sharp angle of the burrow gives a sense of agitation, which suits the vocal puffin.

3 FRAMES OF REFERENCE

CYRIL RUOSO FRANCE

A useful trick in the art of composition is to use a sub-frame within the main frame to isolate your subject. Many objects, including branches, grass and rocks, make perfect natural frames. Alternatively, you can throw the foreground and background out of focus while keeping your subject sharp. Often, it's simply a matter of moving around to find a suitable surround.

Cyril took this unusual picture of a puffin from inside its burrow on the west coast of Iceland. "I wanted to frame the puffin in the entrance to its hole," he says, "but what I like about this shot is the extraordinary similarity between the shape of the puffin and the shape of the burrow."

▶ *www.cyrilruoso.com*

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS 5D + 16–35mm lens; 1/250 sec at f14; ISO 200; flash

4 STRIVE FOR SYMMETRY

MALCOLM SCHUYL UK

The best nature images often have some kind of symmetry. That doesn't necessarily mean that one half of the picture is identical to the other, or that patterns are repeated evenly (though that is often the case). It indicates that there is some form of harmony.

"The symmetry here is provided by all the penguins looking and walking in the same direction," says Malcolm. "There is also an element of symmetry between the fluffy clouds and the freshly fallen snow."

Broken symmetry – for example, if one penguin in a line is walking the 'wrong' way – can create a sense of tension. But if several penguins are walking the wrong way and others are looking down at their feet or up at the sky, the image may feel complicated and confused. Broken symmetry only works when all of the conditions are just right.

▶ *www.wildvisions.co.uk*

TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D2X + 12–24mm lens; 1/500 sec at f11; ISO 125

Symmetry is everywhere in nature. Look for it in groups, such as this band of king penguins in South Georgia, body shapes, gestures, reflections, patterns and coloration.

BREAKING THE RULES

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

This daisy is soft, it's not centred, and there's a big, empty orange space. But, all things considered, it's a great image.

5 BUILD IT YOUR OWN WAY

JAN TÖVE SWEDEN

Composition is by no means a precise science. If you find a great image that contradicts all of the rules, you must go ahead and shoot.

This is precisely what Jan has done to turn a simple portrait of a daisy into a work of art. He has broken several traditional rules of composition – the main subject isn't sharp, for instance, and there is a lot of empty space – but he has produced something really different and eye-catching. Far from being a detailed scientific record, the picture is all about colour and impression.

"Less is often more when composing pictures," says Jan. "What you leave out of the frame is almost as important as what you leave in. If there are too many things going on, you don't know where to look. Equally, if there is no emphasis or focal point, there is no impact. It's a matter of balance."

Despite its simplicity, his picture still has depth. Converging lines (as in the spider's web) can help to achieve this, but Jan has used the overlapping technique, where you deliberately obscure one object with another (the petals in front of the stem). The human eye naturally recognises these layers and mentally separates them out, creating what looks like a three-dimensional image.

▶ *www.jantove.com*

TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS 5D + 100mm lens; 1/60 sec at f2.8; ISO 200

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

▶ STAY FOCUSED

Don't try to include too many compositional elements in a picture – you need a clear subject or emphasis.

▶ QUESTION THE IMAGE

Keep making conscious decisions. Should your image be vertical or horizontal? What should you leave in or out? Are there any lines? Where should you put the main subject?

Mark Carwardine

▶ BLUR THE LINES

There is a great trick often used by landscape photographers that can help to arrange all of the different elements in a picture. You simply pull the lens out of focus before you compose, and the trees, rivers, hills, rocks and branches are replaced by patterns, lines, shapes and colours. When you're happy with the juxtaposition of it all, you can refocus and take the shot.

KNOW YOUR LENS: CHANGE IS GOOD

tech zone

Lenses can affect composition in many different ways. For instance, telephoto lenses flatten perspective, making objects at different distances appear closer together. They also have a narrower angle of view – which brings extra intimacy and makes it easier to exclude distracting elements around the point of interest – and a shallower depth of field. In contrast, wide-angle lenses exaggerate perspective and have a bigger depth of field. Best of all, they create an almost three-dimensional effect thanks to an optical illusion that distorts the relative size of objects and the distances between them.

Laurie Campbell

The distortion produced by the wide-angle lens makes the rowan berries in the foreground appear unusually large, while the other elements seem further away.

NOW YOU DO IT

Ilkka Räsänen/Veolia Environnement WPOY 2011

Admire exclusive picture galleries, read previous Masterclasses and enter our online photo contests at DiscoverWildlife.com

NEXT MONTH LOOK FOR COLOUR Learn how to read and use nature's diverse hues