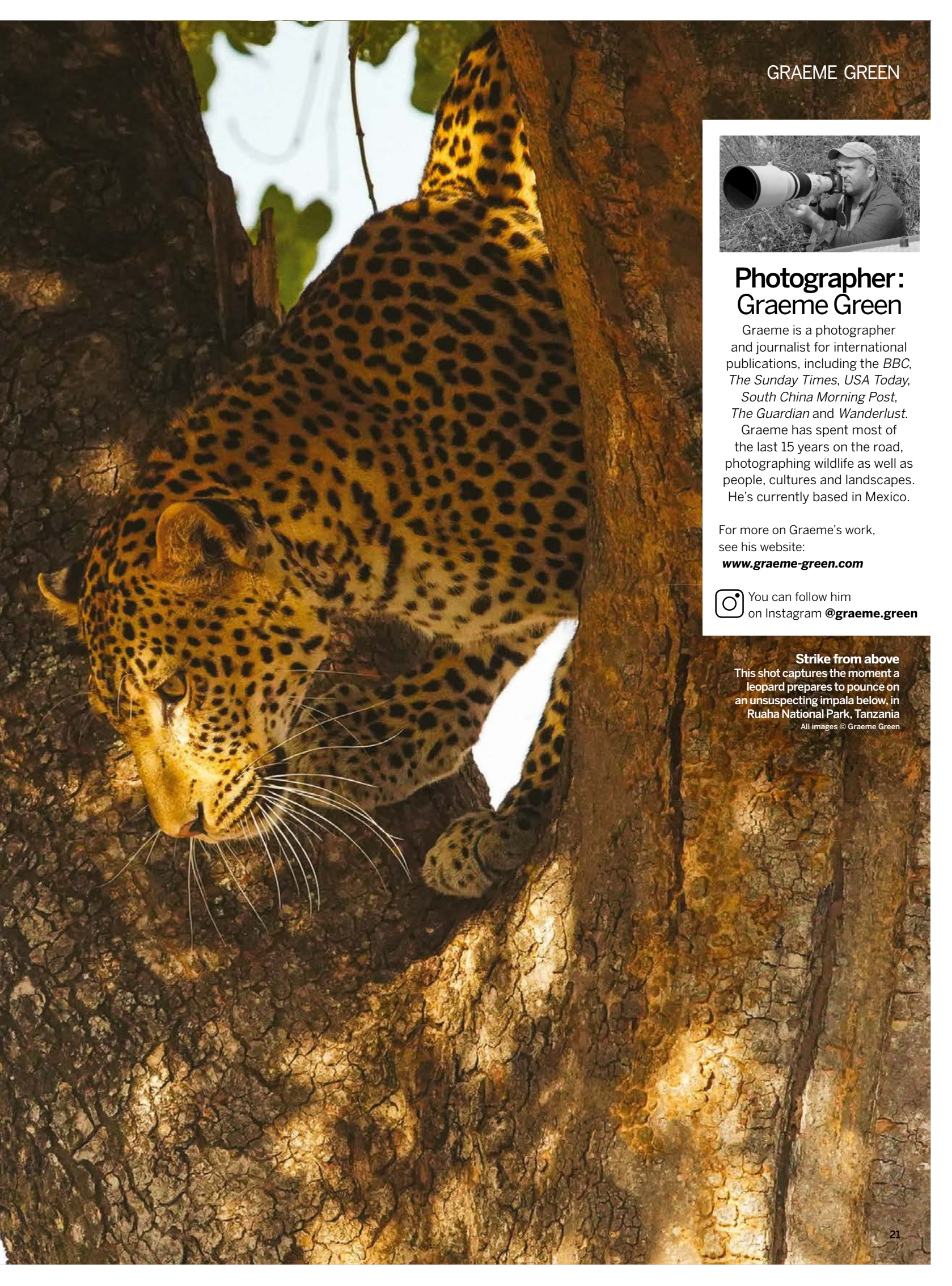


INTERVIEW

# INTO THE **WILD**

Travel photographer and writer Graeme Green discusses his approach to photographing animals in their natural environment



GRAEME GREEN



## Photographer: Graeme Green

Graeme is a photographer and journalist for international publications, including the *BBC*, *The Sunday Times*, *USA Today*, *South China Morning Post*, *The Guardian* and *Wanderlust*.

Graeme has spent most of the last 15 years on the road, photographing wildlife as well as people, cultures and landscapes. He's currently based in Mexico.

For more on Graeme's work, see his website:

[www.graeme-green.com](http://www.graeme-green.com)



You can follow him on Instagram [@graeme.green](https://www.instagram.com/graeme.green)

### Strike from above

This shot captures the moment a leopard prepares to pounce on an unsuspecting impala below, in Ruaha National Park, Tanzania

All images © Graeme Green

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### **W**hen did you first start getting into photography?

I started taking pictures when I was a teenager, but I really began dedicating time to photography when I moved up to Glasgow to study. I'd spend time walking around the city or out in places like Loch Lomond or Glencoe, photographing on black and white film. Photography can be both exciting and calming, and it helps you to focus and be more attentive to what's around you. For me, at least, it lets you see things that otherwise you might not notice. I like that.

As well as photography being a way to explore the world and to be creative, I wrote songs and played in bands in Glasgow, and used some of my photos for album covers, flyers and posters.

A few years into working as a journalist, I lined up assignments in the Shetlands, Nepal, Hawaii, Zambia... What had been a hobby and a way to be creative then became a vital part of my job.

### **Was it always wildlife that you were interested in photographing?**

I was always up for adventure and wanted to see the world. When I was younger I went backpacking around the US, travelling around by Greyhound bus, sleeping on beaches and mountains and exploring the national parks, photographing red rock deserts, canyons and big sky country. At home, I looked at photography books. Places like Tibet and Cambodia fascinated me, and I read books about wildlife adventures in Africa and elsewhere, as well as looking at photography books and watching wildlife documentaries.

But wildlife photography didn't seem all that accessible. I don't come from a hugely wealthy background, and trips to Africa or Antarctica weren't, and still aren't, cheap. I didn't have expectations. But through my job, I made things happen. I came up with original story ideas and photographic subjects that were of interest to me, and I secured assignments from editors. I took every opportunity seriously and worked really hard, constantly pushing myself to get better as a photographer, making sure I filed the best work I could.

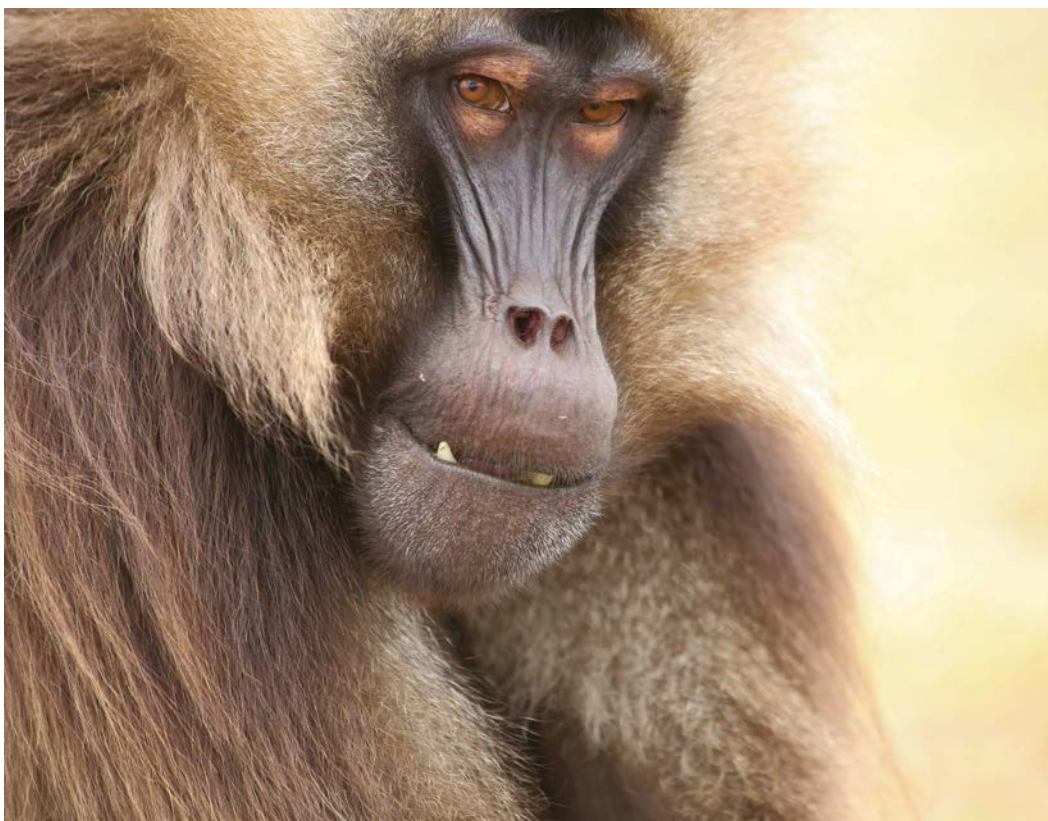
Getting to spend time with some of the world's most incredible creatures in wild locations around the world is hard to beat. It's not something I take lightly.

### **Tell us about the first really successful image that you shot?**

On my first trip to Kenya I photographed a lion roaming across the grasslands. In the background, there was a tree with vultures in the high branches, eagerly watching the lion. It was shot on an old, inexpensive camera, and I'm not sure the image quality would hold up now, but I really liked the composition. Rather than just framing the lion close-in, it told a



“Through my job, I made things happen.  
I came up with original story ideas”





*Left*  
**Bleeding heart**  
 A fine gelada monkey, also known as bleeding heart monkey, chews on a piece of grass in the Simien Mountains in Ethiopia

*Far left*  
**Golden hour**  
 As the sun casts a soft orange light across the ground, this elephant uses its trunk to reach the high branches of a baobab tree in Ruaha National Park, Tanzania

*Bottom left*  
**Staring contest**  
 This photograph, shot in the Simien Mountains, captures a gelada monkey making intense eye contact with the camera

*Below*  
**Big family**  
 A family of elephants make their way over the grasslands of the Mara Triangle, in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya



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story. The picture gave a sense of the animal's environment and relationship with other creatures: the predator on the hunt and the clean-up crew, ready and waiting.

Another early assignment was to photograph vultures in Nepal. Their numbers have been decimated across Asia. Vultures aren't exactly the most beloved creatures on the planet but they have a vital role in ecosystems, and I learned a lot about their behaviour. That was a lesson to me, early on, in looking closely at wildlife that isn't so popular, and that less iconic animals and birds are worthy of attention. Photographically, vultures are more interesting than I expected. As well as photos of flight, I took close-up portraits that brought out a bit of character, trying to show another side to these birds.

### **What was the earliest lesson you learnt about photography that you still consider relevant today?**

To get down (and not in the James Brown sense). The standard view from a safari vehicle means looking down on animals. Photos of the top of animals' or people's heads just don't look very good. I really like to be on foot in Africa. You feel far more a part of the environment than when you're in a van, and it allows you to get down on the ground or on eye-level with a lot of animals, which is important. The same goes for any other wildlife locations, whether Langkawi or Antarctica or the jungles of Mexico – getting low, either at eye level or below, makes for better wildlife photos.

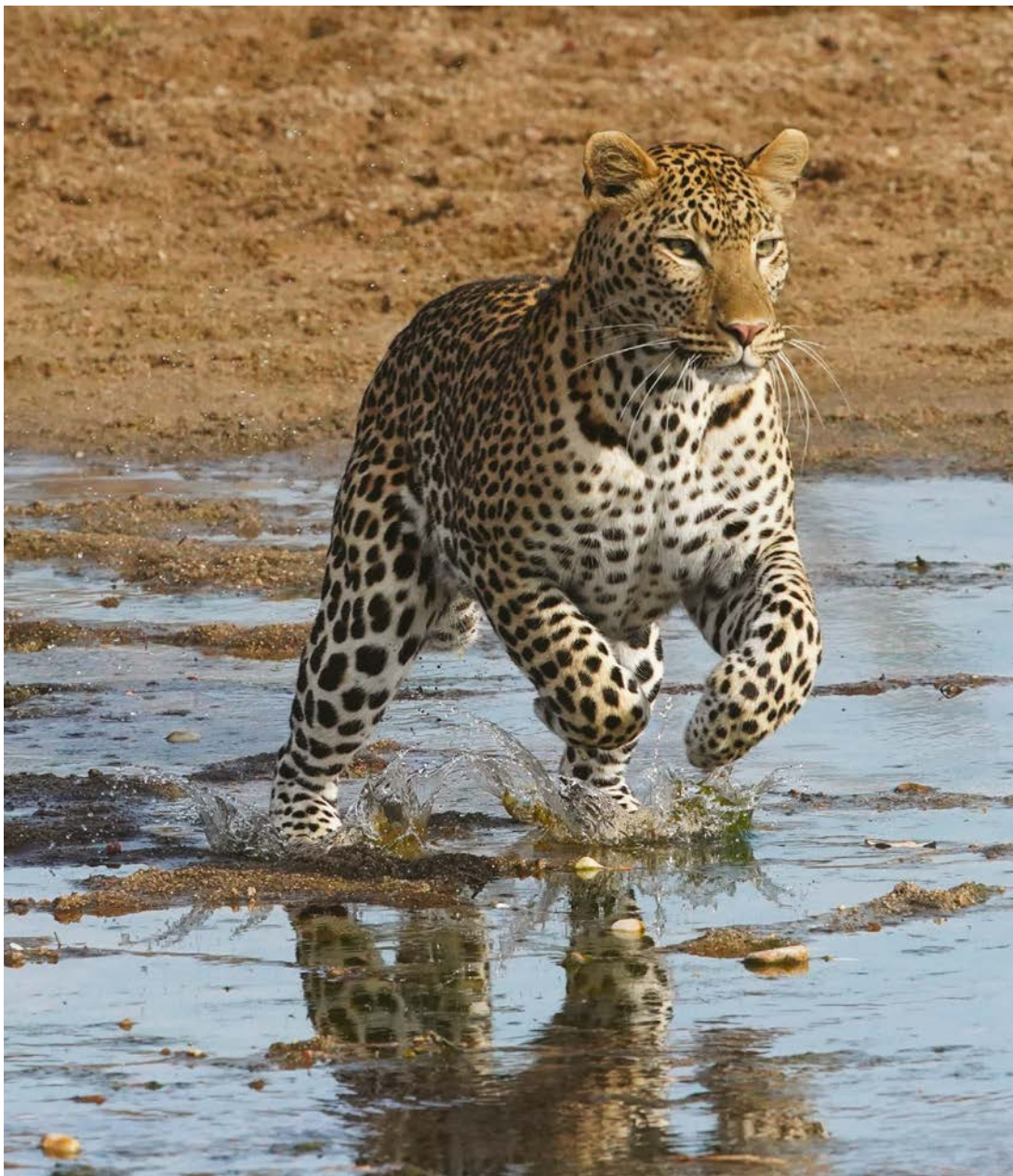
Patience is also vital. There's often a lot to see in wildlife locations, and some people rush around trying to photograph every single thing. Taking the time to sit and watch, to learn something about an animal's behaviour and maybe predict what might happen next, is more rewarding and means you should get more satisfying photos.

### **How would you describe what you are trying to achieve in your images?**

The natural world is remarkable and endlessly fascinating, so you need to do it justice. I want my photos to have a sense of life in them, a sense of wonder and beauty, and to show how incredible the life on our planet is. If you photograph an elephant, a rock agama or a pelican, and you make it look ordinary and dull, clearly you've failed.

But it isn't just about documenting what's there. A lot of my work is about telling stories, so often my photos work together. But I also want each individual photo to stand out as an image in its own right. It comes down to creativity and ideas. I work hard to try to create photos that feel personal or original. I'm really set on producing my own take.

There are so many photos out there now. It's not enough to just get people's attention



#### *Above* **My land**

A powerful leopard bounds across the Mwagusi River in Tanzania to confront and chase away a cheetah in a territorial dispute

#### *Below* **Surf's up**

This photograph perfectly frames the moment a gentoo penguin stands on an ice 'surf board' in the waters around Antarctica

#### *Top right* **Oi! blue eyes**

A blue-eyed angle-headed lizard watches closely from the trunk of a tree in Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak, Malaysia

#### *Bottom right* **Lazy day**

A cheetah is captured looking relaxed and lazing around in the evening, in Mara Naboisho Conservancy in Kenya





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### ON LOCATION

Mara Naboisho Conservancy in Kenya, just outside the main Maasai Mara National Reserve, is a fantastic wildlife location with thriving populations of lions, leopards, cheetahs, elephants and more

### LION KINGS

This intimate shot foccuses in on two of four adult male lions, all brothers, who roam together and control a considerable territory

– photos need to hold people's attention, to have something captivating about them so that people can look and look again.

#### **What essential advice would you give someone who wants to start taking photos like yours?**

I learnt by going out and doing, and I would recommend that to people. On every trip and every assignment, I learnt something new, whether it's a way to use light or animal behaviour or a camera function, figuring out what you like and what you don't like in pictures. There are some things you can only really learn out in the field, by practising, developing, pushing forward.

You should always critique your work, and you need to be brutal. There's no point patting yourself on the back. If something isn't right

with a photo, figure out what it is and take that lesson with you next time.

I also think you need to think about what you're really trying to achieve, what kind of photos you want to take, what kind of animals or behaviour you want to photograph. Do some research, look at logistics and planning, and talk to experts to give yourself the best chance of doing that.

Wildlife often moves fast and incredible moments can be over in an instant, so you need to be prepared and to keep a cool mind. Wild animals rarely stop to pose, and no matter how nicely you ask, they won't go back and repeat a move, so you usually only have one chance.

But I'm not sure I'd advise anyone to try to take photos like mine, in the same way that I don't set out to take photos like any other one

photographer. You can learn from all kinds of sources, but ultimately finding your own take is the way to go.

#### **What are the most common mistakes that should be avoided?**

Just pointing and shooting is probably the most common mistake. People often get excited to see an animal and just get it on the memory card and move on to find something else, without really giving the taking of that specific photo any thought. One outstanding photo is worth more than hundreds of poor, uninteresting, hurriedly taken pictures. It pays to slow down, to spend time with animals, and to really think about how to take the best possible picture. If the angle isn't right, move. If the light isn't right, wait or move to a different position. Think about composition

*Left*  
**Lion brothers**  
 An affectionate moment between a pair of adult male lion brothers in Mara Naboisho Conservancy, Kenya

Another of my favourite experiences was photographing gelada monkeys in Ethiopia's Simien Mountains. Bako National Park in Sarawak, Malaysia was great for proboscis monkeys and pit vipers. Los Llanos in Venezuela has interesting species, including capybaras, anacondas and crocodiles. I also like wintry locations, such as Hokkaido in northern Japan, which is great for eagles and cranes, and Antarctica.

All of those are places I'd happily go back to, but there are so many new places I haven't explored yet too.

#### What's your favourite species?

I really like spending time with big cats, especially lions. They're incredible to watch and to photograph – so regal, elegant and powerful, and they have such a range of behaviour, from affection and play to hunting.

Photographing gorillas is also unforgettable. They're fantastic to be close to – to see their eyes and expressions, the big fists of silverbacks tearing branches and infants tumbling around.

But for me wildlife photography isn't just about big, iconic creatures. I like spending time with lesser known, less familiar creatures, like the rock agamas I mentioned, or golden tree frogs or angle-headed lizards. With birds, I can happily spend days photographing condors and eagles, but it also doesn't get much better than colourful birds like a lilac-breasted roller or a green bee-eater, which are all worthy of attention. Smaller animals and birds are often more challenging to photograph too, which is part of the fun. But ultimately all creatures, great and small, should be celebrated.

#### What plans have you got for the future?

I've spent a lot of time working in Mexico over the last decade, photographing people, cultures and landscapes, as well as birds and wildlife. Soon I'm looking to produce a book of my Mexico pictures. I've also had people getting in touch via my website to ask about prints of my work, so that's something I'm looking to set up.

I've also got assignments coming up in Iceland, and I'm likely to be heading back to Africa. I've never photographed mandrills and would really like to try to find them, and to photograph black-maned lions in the Kalahari.

Beyond that, I'm in the early stages of a big international project that will combine photography with conservation, though it's all under wraps for now. I'm hoping to announce that later this year. **DP**

#### SPEND TIME ON THE DETAILS

As well as the tenderness, I think it's a photo where you can spend time looking and finding details, including the cuts and scratches on the muzzles of both lions, the different shades of their fur and manes, and the eye looking straight at the camera

#### A DIFFERENT STORY

Here we see a moment of affection between two brothers, gently rubbing against each other. Lions are good hunters, powerful animals that are often feared. I wanted to show this other, gentler side to them

beyond just getting the animal in the frame. You can juxtapose an animal with something in the environment, whether a rock or a tree or the moon, or get in close on details, such as skin texture or claws, or frame the face.

#### Do you have a favourite location?

I was in Ruaha National Park in Tanzania last year. It's far less known and more remote than Serengeti, more wild, and it has lions, leopards, cheetah and elephants, as well as smaller, less-known wildlife, like Ruaha hornbills, alien-like rock agamas and rock hyraxes. I saw a leopard hunt from a tree, leaping down onto an impala, which you could spend a lifetime in Africa and never see. Ruaha has tons of life and diverse landscapes too, from baobab forests to granite boulders to vast grasslands. It's a place where I could spend years without getting bored.

## Graeme's top tips

### Pro advice for wildlife photography

#### 1 LEARN BY DOING

The best way to improve as a wildlife photographer is to get out, practice, learn by doing and push yourself forward.

#### 2 CRITIQUE YOUR WORK

Study your work and ask what you like and don't like. How can it be improved?

#### 3 THINK

Don't just point your camera at an animal. Think about depth of field, shutter speed, focal points, angles, light, behaviour and movement, creative approaches and every aspect of the photo.

#### 4 GET LOW

The top of an animal's head isn't the most interesting perspective. Get down, either at eye level or below.

#### 5 BE ORIGINAL

Don't just frame the animal. Use elements of the environment, or focus on details (textures, patterns, abstract elements), or single out eyes, paws, trunks...

#### 6 CONSIDER YOUR GOAL

Do you want portraits of infant animals? Or to photograph hunting behaviour? What you want determines where you go and when, so work towards that goal.

#### 7 BECOME A BEHAVIOURIST

Studying animal behaviour means being able to predict what they might do or where they might go next.

#### 8 BE PATIENT

Taking a quick photo and hurrying on to the next subject often means missing great photo potential. Slow down and spend time watching animals.

#### 9 EYES HAVE IT

Eyes are often important to wildlife photos. They make a photo of an animal more soulful and alive.

#### 10 STAY COOL

Wild animals often move quickly and the photographic moment is gone. Stay cool and get the action when it happens.

#### 11 SUFFER IF NECESSARY

Wade through mud, climb up mountains, stand in the desert heat or the snow – whatever it takes to get the photo.

#### 12 DON'T OVER-PROCESS

Over-sharpened or over-saturated animal photos with artificially coloured coats or 'popping' eyes, skies in unnatural hues and other post-production errors make wildlife photos look worse, not better.