

A person is crouching in a misty forest, holding a camera on a tripod. The scene is dimly lit, with a soft glow emanating from the background, creating a dreamlike atmosphere. The trees are tall and thin, their trunks forming a natural archway over the path. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and grass.

BEHIND THE LENS

Photographic stories to inspire your photography

Lions hunting under star trails

Antelope Park, Zimbabwe



I had been commissioned to write the accompanying book for the ITV television series *Lion Country*. One of the chapters covered how lions hunt and needed several photographic illustrations. My problem was, lions typically hunt at night and so getting a useable photograph was a real challenge.

One night I was walking in the bush, without my camera, thinking about the task at hand. For a moment I stopped and looked skyward. The African sky at night is a mesmerising sight - an inky black velvet curtain against which a billion trillion stars gaze down on you. From there my thoughts turned to star trails before they settled again on the tribulations of photographing lions hunting. Then they returned to star trails. Then back to lions hunting. Star trails. Lions hunting. Lions hunting, star trails ... lions hunting under star trails. Eureka! I had my story. I headed back to camp, grabbed a sheet of paper and, along the top, wrote the caption: *Lions hunting under star trails*. On the same sheet of paper, I drew the image as I perceived it. It wasn't a great drawing (there's a reason I became a photographer) but the semblance of the idea was there in black and white.

Next I had to figure out how to create the image - the equipment I'd need and the settings I'd use. At the time, my cameras were Nikon D3's, so that was a given, but I had a choice of lenses. Because the image I envisaged needed to reveal a large expanse of sky and was akin to a landscape with animals in it, I settled on a 24mm wide angle lens. On my piece of paper, under the heading *Equipment*, I wrote "24mm"

My next thought was exposure. Because star trails require a long exposure, I had to calculate how long I could keep the shutter open (the exposure time) before noise, generated by the heat of the sensor, degraded image quality beyond a usable level. This took me three nights, testing various exposure combinations before I settled on 10-minutes. I made a note on my drawing under the heading *Settings*.

Next on my list was focus and the question, *how do you focus on a subject when you can't see it?* A detail you can't know from the image alone is, when I was taking the photograph it was pitch black. It was so dark, I was standing one meter from my tripod and I couldn't see it. The answer came from the distant past. In the "old days", before autofocus, action photographers would use zonal focusing, the idea being you don't have to focus on the subject, the subject simply has to be within the camera's zone of focus, which is determined by depth-of-field. I simply had know which lens aperture on a 24mm lens would give me depth-of-field from infinity (the distance of the stars) to around seven meters, that being about as close as I wanted the lions to be. The answer was f/11.

Finally, I had to consider how I was going to light the unlit foreground. With no ambient light, I settled on flash. The question was, *how many flash units?* To ensure the artificial light looked more natural, I knew I wanted to use large diffusers, which would reduce the distance the light travelled but increase its spread. I calculated the spread from my Nikon SB-800 Speed

Lights at 10-metres. The calculation told me I needed two Speed Lights, angled at 30-degrees from the perpendicular. As I went along, I was noting all of these calculations and conclusions on the visualised drawing.

I now knew how I was going to compose my image, what equipment I needed and what settings I was going to use. I waited for six days and then I went in search of lions. When we found them, I set my tripod on the ground, turned off the torch and pressed the shutter. In the first ten minutes, nothing happened. I pressed the shutter again and waited. After another eight minutes, I heard the lions move. I paused a moment, then manually triggered the two flash units, which I was holding above my head, to capture the image you see here.

You may wonder why I waited six days, specifically. For this image to work, there had to be no moon because the light of the moon would have created a ghost image of the lions during the ten minute exposure. I was six days from the one day a month the moon doesn't appear in the night sky.

Top tip - The power of intent

Don't get me wrong, there are times to be playful with a camera, to experiment and be creative with thoughts, ideas and techniques; to choose a lens that goes against conventional wisdom; to be daring, break all the rules and simply do whatever the hell you want. I do all these things regularly and I do them *when it doesn't matter*.

However, as a professional photographer, the images I make pay my mortgage and put food on the table, so, when I'm working on assignment, it's important I deliver - that I come home with the images I went out to get. In those moments, I always approach my work by starting with an end in mind - with intent.

If you are reading this as an amateur photographer, in the sense you don't make your living from photography, it's possible to argue you aren't under the same pressure. I would disagree. The level of pressure is the same, the reason is different. My pressure is financial. If I don't deliver I don't get paid and if I don't get paid I don't eat. But I have time on my side. My recollection of my amateur days is having to squeeze photography into a life filled with other commitments - work, family, social engagements and the like - so the time I had for photography was very limited, which meant I had to make the most of that time if I was to come back with photographs I was proud of. What helped me achieve that was intent - starting with an end in mind.

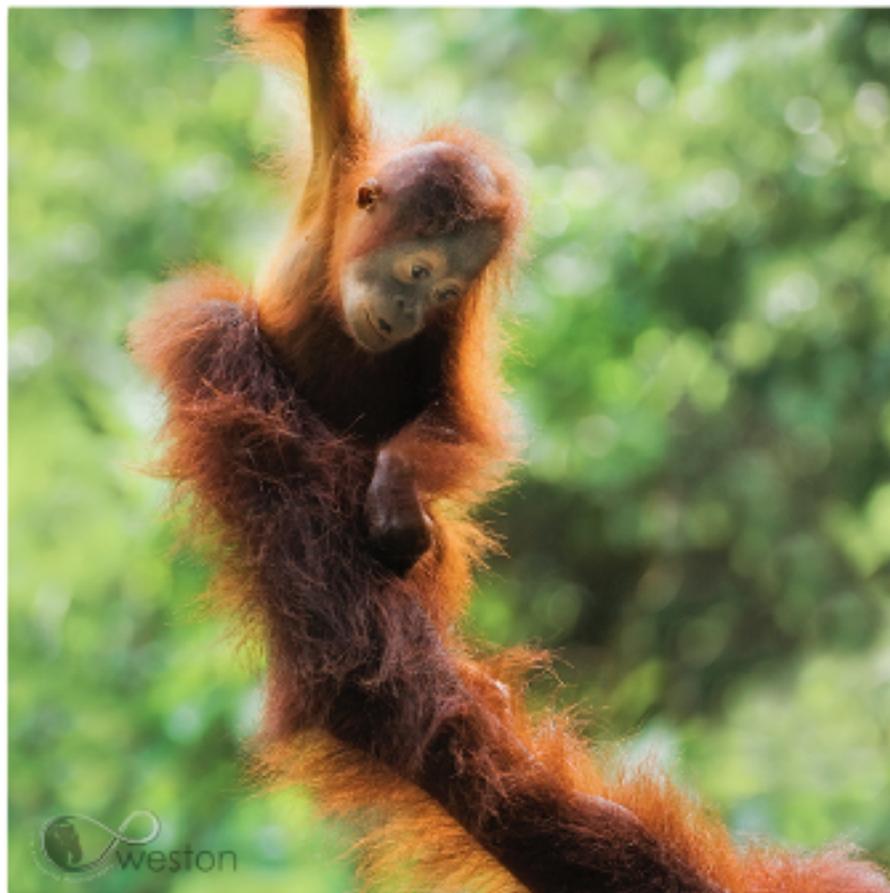
The maternal bond

Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre, Borneo

I was in Borneo photographing orang-utan for a book I was writing about endangered species and conservation. Because I had never before photographed orang-utan, I decided to spend three days at an orang-utan orphanage to study their behaviour and formulate ideas for pictures before I ventured into the jungle in search of wild creatures.

At the end of the first day, over dinner I started talking to another guest. Dr Francine Neago had spent her entire adult life, which was considerable, caring for and conserving orang-utan. She was an endless source of stories and tales and anecdotes about these fascinating creatures. When we got onto the subject of conservation, she told me orphanages like the one we were visiting now are fine for saving individual orang-utans but they are not a solution for conserving the species as a whole. One of things she told me was, *“The maternal bond between a mother and baby orang-utan is the strongest in nature, even greater than that of humans. In order for a baby orang-utan to thrive, it needs love as well as nourishment.”* She went on to explain, *“When an orphan orang-utan arrives at a sanctuary, feeding it helps it to survive. But to thrive it needs the love of a mother, which invariably is provided by a human surrogate. And, as soon as you habituate an orang-utan to humans - a consequence of surrogacy - it can never be released into the wild.”*





After dinner, I thought about this conversation and what kept coming back to me was Dr Neago's statement about mother and baby: "*The maternal bond between a mother and baby orang-utan is the strongest in nature.*" I thought, *what a beautiful sentiment - what a beguiling story.* The next day, I went to the orphanage with the sole intent of photographing *that* story. I didn't pre-plan shots, I didn't draw compositions on paper, I didn't presuppose camera settings. Instead, I put faith in my knowledge and experience of camera technique, which allowed me to be mindful to my task, and let curiosity guide me. And every time I framed an image I asked myself the question, "*Does this composition tell the story?*" When the answer came back "Yes" I pressed the shutter and captured a meaningful image.

Top tip - Don't photograph common nouns

A technique I use a lot is, before I press the shutter, I ask myself the question, "*What's the caption for this image?*" If the only answer I can think of is a common noun (e.g. orang-utan, tree, church, deer, man) then I don't take the photograph because what I'll get is nothing more than a record shot. Instead, I wait for a better, stronger image. As an exercise, look at the image, left, and write the caption. Notice how behind every strong image is an interesting story.

Why are zebras black and white striped?

Kruger National Park, South Africa



I became a wildlife photographer because I am fascinated by oddities in nature. As a kid I was always pondering questions such as, *Why are zebras black and white striped when they live in a yellow savannah?* Curiosity compelled me to find answers. As I studied, I learned more and more about my subjects.

Knowing your subject deeply is a great source for story ideas. It was the inspiration behind this image. Take a look at the top left corner of the photograph. Can you tell what part of a zebra that is? Shoulder? Neck? Rump? The answer is almost certainly *no*. And that's how zebra camouflage works.

If you watch a herd of zebras closely, you'll notice they rarely stand still. They're constantly moving. That movement causes the stripes to mingle and merge to the extent it becomes impossible for a lion to tell where one zebra starts and another one ends. In other words, a lion cannot distinguish the attack point and there is no lion in its right mind that will go charging into a herd of zebras unless it knows exactly what it's aiming for - because it will be killed or mortally wounded. Black and white stripes? Far from being a give-away, it's one of the most effective forms of camouflage of all African wildlife.

Watch how lions hunt zebras and you'll notice, to improve their chances, they separate a single zebra from the heard. Now, against the yellow savannah, black and white stripes aren't such a good thing. Lions can easily pick out the neck and the rump -

the two main attack points - of the isolated animal and invariably, in this instance, they make the kill.

The caption for this image is, *Zebras as lions see them*. Once I discovered the reason zebras are black and white striped, I wanted to tell that story - the story of camouflage - using photography as my medium. In my mind, I visualised the picture. I imagined the composition, thought about what type of lighting I'd need (soft), the formation of the herd that would give me the density the composition needed. From conception to getting the image in the bag took three years. That's how long I had to wait for the right herd of zebras, the right light and me to all be in the same place at the same time. But I never give up. Every time I travelled to Africa, I had this image in mind and when I saw it, I was ready. The moral of this story is, it's far easier to find a needle in a haystack when you know it's a needle you're looking for.

Top tip - Researching your subject

The best way to research your subject is to spend time observing it. If it's a person, talk to them, engage in conversation, share stories and life experiences. The purpose of a portrait is to reveal the person's personality. If your subject is a landscape or building, walk across and around it, visit at different hours of the day and year, if time permits, study how its affected by light and weather. Learn its history and, in the case of a landscape, its geology. Notice the small details. For buildings, look at how the architect has used line and shape. Consider the material used (texture) and use your observations when composing your image. Always, your aim is to reveal the essence of the subject, not the semblance.

Dali's horses

Réserve Naturelle Nationale de Camargue, France



In the Spring of 2016 I was in the Camargue, in southern France, on an assignment to photograph the regions famous wild horses and I found myself in a photographic crisis of sorts. When I imagine Camargue horses I envisage powerful, galloping stallions, thundering across the Rhone marshes, nostrils flared, hooves pounding the wet earth and water cascading all around them. And for the first two days of my assignment, that's precisely what I'd got. On the third day, however, I was in a quiet meadow with eight colts, a mare and her foal. There were no *gardians* to wrangle them and they looked far too disinterested for galloping anyway. With my camera in my hand, I was at a complete creative loss.

You see, typically, this isn't my style of wildlife photography - horses standing in a field. I was outside my comfort zone and, constrained by old patterns of seeing and thinking, my instinctive reaction was to go and do something else, something more familiar. Instead, I stayed. I recognised that my preconceived notions of how the horses *should* be meant, at first glance, I couldn't see an image. Together with my determination to *get a picture*, by trying to make my every thought and idea fit into preconceived notions, my mind was set like a concrete block.

To solve my problem, I let go of the style of photography to which I was so attached and, sitting down with the resting mare,

I lay my camera in my lap, I opened my mind and I waited. I waited for over an hour. Each time an old belief came to mind, I acknowledge it respectfully and set it aside, keeping my mind open to new concepts, working to the notion *if we change our way of thinking we change our way of seeing*. This mindful approach to the assignment enabled me to see my subject and my surroundings in a new light, which, by definition, meant I was able to conjure new images. This is how we progress. In fact, every major shift in thinking and seeing, whether in art or science, has come about when an individual or a group of people have been able to see beyond perceptions and appearances because they believed that direct viewing could be deceptive.

In researching this notion, I had spent some time looking into the lives and methodologies of great scientists and artists, including the famous Spanish artist Salvador Dali. Much of Dali's most notable paintings were inspired not by the real world but by his dreams and hallucinations and, as I sat with the mare, he came to mind. As I thought about the strangeness of Dali's surrealist work, this image formed in front of me. The old me wouldn't have pressed the shutter but the new me, open to new ideas and possibility, did. To be honest, I am not a big fan of Dali's work and I'm not even sure I like this photograph *but* it makes a statement and asks questions, and that, surely, is the purpose of photography.

The devil is in the detail

Kruger National Park, South Africa



I took this image in Kruger National Park, in South Africa, at a popular spot known as Sunset Dam, which has a resident population of hippopotamuses and crocodiles. It was overcast, the end-of-day light was low and dull, and, truth be told, I'd packed my camera away. I was using the time to just sit and watch and unwind after what had been a tiring day in the field.

This particular hippo emerged from the depths, snorted, blowing water from its nostrils, and floated awhile on the surface. As I observed I became conscious of something I'd never before been aware of. When you think of a hippo, you imagine an ovoid blob with skin perfectly smooth. But looking more deeply, more mindfully, I noticed for the first time the rough texture and shapeliness of hippopotamuses' heads - the detail in the design. Inspired, I unpacked my camera.

Careful and clever use of design elements is integral to creating images that, individually, tell a compelling story. For example, of all the design elements, colour is the most powerful. This is because human beings attach subjective meaning to colour above and beyond the inherent psychological affects all design elements impose on us. So, in much the same way vision, which is our primary sense, overpowers our other four senses, colour overpowers line, shape, pattern and texture. Remove colour, however, and the other elements are given space to expand. Because of the overpowering nature of colour, by converting the image to black and white, *removing* colour, colour no longer distracts from the two remaining design elements - texture and shape (there is no real line or pattern to consider). In this example, omitting colour simplifies the composition so the story becomes clear and unambiguous.

Top tip - Wake up!

Throughout life, our actions and behaviour are largely governed by habits buried deep in our sub-conscious mind, tendencies that are wedded to old beliefs and firmly-established patterns of thinking. Oftentimes, this ability to act without thinking is essential to our survival. For example, while driving, if the car in front of you brakes suddenly, this is not the time to contemplate creative responses, it's time for immediate, instinctive action.

At other times, however, to be constrained by what we know and believe is detrimental to our aims - and this is especially so in art, which includes photography. Habits are the anathema of creativity. Knowledge holds us back. For new ideas to flow and creativity to blossom we need to wake up. Waking up, in this sense, means being in a state of open-hearted, open-minded conversation with yourself and your environment, and abandoning old routines and ancient habits in order to find new ways of seeing the world. It's about discarding persistent behaviours, and recognising and reforming patterns that cause you to think in a particular way so you might form new ideas that lead to outcomes that serve your photography now - in *this* moment.

When you are able to clear your mind of prejudgements, you unlock doors that lead to new potentialities and the barriers between you and the spaces in which ideas we call genius are born disappear. In simple terms, waking up leads to creativity and creative thinking leads to better photographs because you simply see *more* and it's the "more" that enables you to create intriguing images of common subjects or discover hidden compositions that non-creative thinkers can't or don't conceive.