

11 Things You Can Do Right Now to Improve Your Wildlife Photography



Wildlife photography takes time and patience to learn and master. And when you have mastered it, you will just continue learning. You are never “ready”. Never stop learning. Never stop evolving.

Always respect nature and the animals and do not disturb them unnecessarily. And sometimes, just look with your eyes and not through your viewfinder. You’ll find new perspectives, when you also put your camera down.

And most of all, enjoy!

**Piritta Paija
January 2023
in Namibia**

A lone giraffe on the plains of the Masai Mara National Park in Kenya. March 2022. But if you look more carefully, you'll see that the giraffe is not actually alone. *

Keep Your Shutter Speed Up and Look for Something Unexpected

Most of the time, wildlife is photographed with a telephoto lens. Long lenses exaggerate camera shake because a small movement of the camera results in a large movement of the picture frame. Therefore, you need to use a faster shutter speed to get sharp shots. In general, the longer the lens, the faster the shutter speed needs to be.

Nowadays most cameras and lenses have Image Stabilisation, enabling you to push the boundaries. However, a good rule of thumb is to keep your shutter speed faster than 1 over the focal length of the lens. For example, with a 400mm lens, you should keep your shutter speed faster than 1/400th second. With a 200mm lens then 1/200s should be fine. Generally with wide-angle lenses, using 1/50s or faster tend to be fine.

All rules are made for breaking, and sometimes low shutter speed is what you are looking for, if you i.e. want to blur a movement of an animal. But first learn the rules, and then break them.

Sometimes it's also a good idea to look for something unexpected to your frame. Something that the viewer maybe notices only after looking twice. Make your imagery more interesting.

* With whom is the giraffe in the photo on the right?



A herd of elephants protecting their young ones in Amboseli National Park in Kenya. March 2022. There were lions in the nearby bushes, so the elephants formed a protective circle around the young ones and kicked the dust in the air to obscure the immediate view.

Be Prepared for Sudden Moments

Being prepared will increase the odds of you capturing great images. This starts with knowing your gear. You should understand the main features of your camera and how they work so that in the field you can adjust your settings "on-the-fly" without having to think about them.

You should also research your location and your subjects. If you have a good understanding of these, you will be able to start predicting animal behaviour and your chances of being in the right place at the right time will improve.

You can also try to envisage the shots you want to take. If you have an idea for a few unique images then you can make sure you have the necessary equipment and have thought about your camera settings in advance.

Animal behavior is one of the most interesting subjects to photograph. It reflects the nature as it is and really tells a story of the situation, the environment and the wild animals in it. And in these situations you'll have a big advantage when you know your gear and have an understanding about animal behavior.



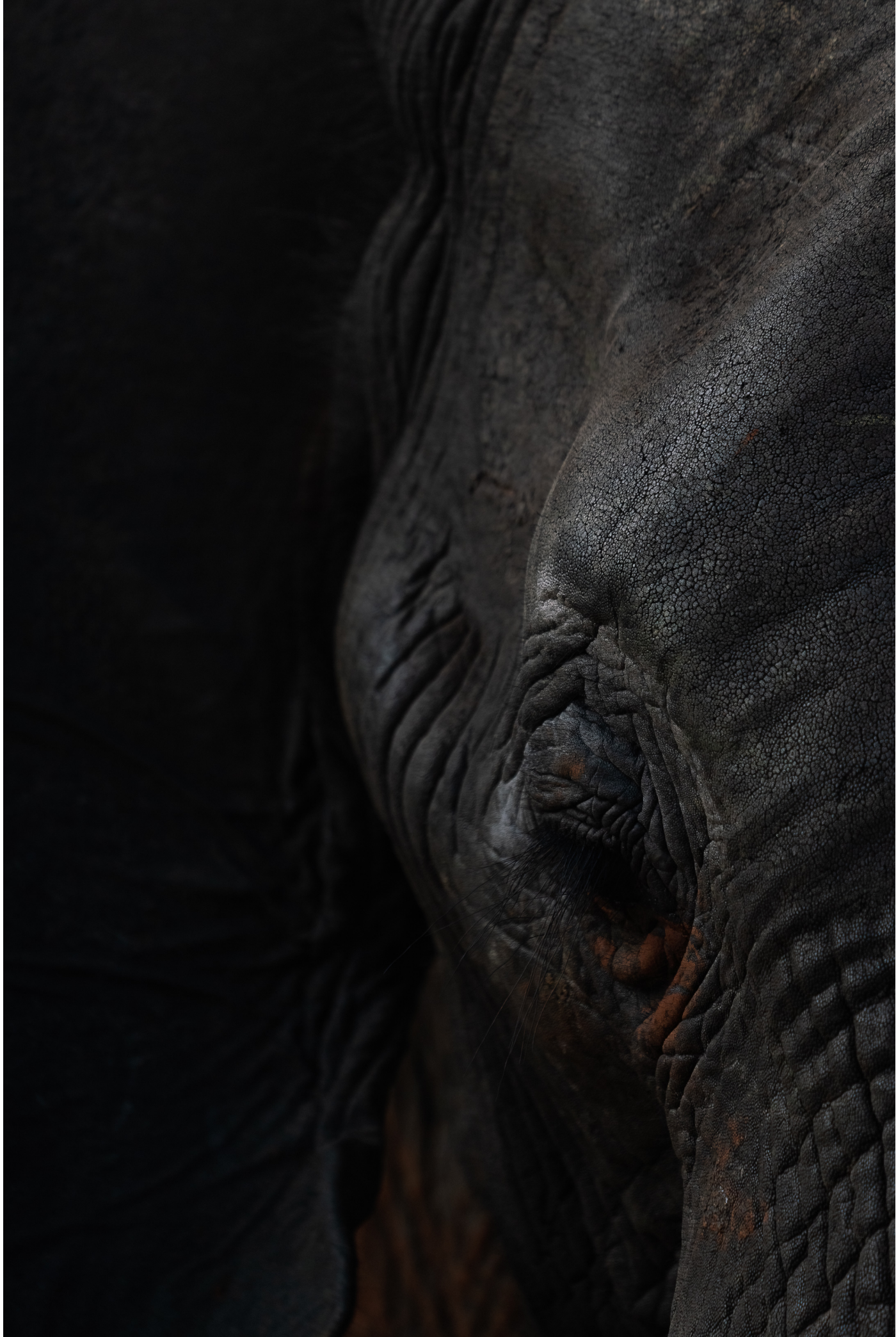
An intimate portrait of an elephant cow in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. April 2022. You can almost feel the presence of this animal, maybe almost feel what the elephant feels at this moment.

Spend Longer With Your Subject – Get Into the Details, Reflect Feelings

Many people stay with an animal only until they get the shot they're happy with and then move on to the next subject. This results in a number of good shots of varied subject matter. However, I've found that sticking with one subject for longer and really working it has made a big difference to the quality of the images.

The longer you spend with an animal, the more chance you have of witnessing (and capturing on camera) something special. In addition, once you have taken the obvious shots, you will become more creative as you try to find new photographs and new angles to take. Ultimately this is what leads to achieving truly notable images.

Details are a good point of view to try out. When you take detailed shots of your subject, it makes you think differently and more creatively. And do not be afraid of utilizing an under- or overexposure a bit, if it adds up to your photo.



A young lion observes me in Gorongosa National Park in Mozambique. May 2021.

Get Low

A good wildlife photograph is rarely taken looking down at the subject. The camera is almost always on the same level as the subject or lower.

This is important for two reasons:

- 1) It gives the subject greater presence and helps the viewer connect with the animal.
- 2) It increases the distance between the subject and the background, which helps throw the background out of focus and draw attention to the subject.

If possible, lie down to get as low as possible. If you are on safari, then shoot out of the vehicle's window rather than from the roof of your vehicle. I often sit in the footwell of the vehicle to get down even lower.



A dazzle of zebras leaving the waterhole at sunset in Okaukuejo Camp in Etosha National Park, Namibia. April 2022. I made use of the great backlight, as the light was also filtered through the dust that the zebras kicked in the air. I also decided to use a slower shutter speed to blur their movement a bit.

Light Is the Key

Good light can turn an average photo into an extraordinary photo.

The best time for photographing wildlife is around sunrise and sunset and the “Golden Hours” surrounding these times. The light is most beautiful in the ten-fifteen minutes after sunrise and before sunset.

The light rapidly becomes cooler and harsher as the sun moves up in the sky. However, it is still very good for at least an hour or so at the beginning and end of the day. Good light is so important that you should aim never to miss a sunrise or sunset whilst out in the field.

There are two ways to use beautiful sunrise and sunset light. Usually, photographers will shoot with the sun behind them, so that their subject is bathed in lovely warm light.

However, you can also experiment with back-lighting your subjects, particularly if the light is low and strong. For example, when there is dust in the air. Experiment bravely!

Also, don't still be afraid to photograph even in the harshest light of the day – sometimes this will be your best time to take those amazing high-key shots!



Two black rhinos are drinking at the waterhole at Okaukuejo National Park, Namibia. October 2022. Only their rough shapes are reflected from the water in the dark. But isn't it just what makes this photo that bit more interesting?

Think Creatively and You Can Work With Every Situation and Every Light

Don't always think the obvious when you're photographing wildlife. The "obvious" shots are those that have been taken millions of times already. Try to think out of the box and find new, unexpected angles and ways to take a photo.

There are no limits. The only limit is your imagination. I sometimes say that there is no "bad light", there is only a lack of imagination. As said, your camera is just a tool and it will be only as good as is its user. And as said before, the most important tip I can give is: learn all the basics as best as you can. Then you'll have more confidence to use your skills more creatively and courage to break those rules when necessary.



A black rhino drinking at the Okaukuejo Waterhole in Etosha National Park, Namibia. October 2022. This was after sunset and the water was so still that it reflected the rhinos' image almost like a mirror.

Consider the Background

The background can often make or break a photo. First and foremost, you want to make sure it is clear of any unnecessary distractions such as bright spots or messy foliage. You also should ensure your subject stands out from the background and is attractively framed if possible.

Often just moving slightly to the left, right, up or down can shift the subject in relation to the background and completely change the composition and framing. Always take a moment to consider if your shot could be improved by just adjusting your position a bit.

However, always getting rid of the messy background is not possible. Then look for ways on how you could make use of the background, i.e. could you perhaps use the branches of a tree as frames for your subject?



Common cranes leaving in the Autumn. Kirkkonummi, Finland. September 2022.

Leave Space Around Your Subject

Tight portraits certainly have their place but they are just one type of wildlife photograph you can take.

Sometimes it is possible to be more creative, and make a more interesting image, by leaving space around your subject.

This allows you to:

- Use elements of the landscape to frame your subject.**
- Show the animal in its environment.**
- Perfect your composition by cropping later.**

Try experimenting with different focal lengths. Once you have a frame-filling portrait, why not switch to a medium range zoom or wide-angle to capture more of the environment?

Every one of these images will create a different atmosphere and different perspective of the same situation.



A wild cat looks stright at me after escaping from two black-backed jackals up to the tree in Etosha National Park, Namibia.
October 2022.

Focus On the Eyes

You've probably already heard that you should focus on the eyes. If the eyes aren't sharp, it is very hard for the viewer to connect with the subject.

Eye contact can help the viewer to connect with the subject.

However, it is not always necessary. I also like candid photographs where the animal is looking off into the distance or focused on another subject in the frame.

If the animal isn't looking at the camera, you should aim to have it facing and/or looking towards the centre of the frame. For example, if the animal is looking to the right then place the animal on the left-hand side of the picture.

You can also make use of the negative space in the frame when it makes up a good composition. Then there will be quite a big, "empty" space at either side of the frame to where the subject is i.e. looking or moving into. The negative space is always a seamless and meaningful part of the composition, not just a space for its own sake.



An elephant bull crosses a river channel in the Lower Zambezi National Park, Zambia. June 2021.

Shoot in RAW & Understand Your Histogram

It is important to get your exposure correct because with wildlife you may not get a second chance if you mess it up. One of the most important things you can do is shoot in RAW – not JPG! This will ensure your camera maintains all details in the shadows and highlights, so that you can darken or brighten the image later if necessary. This gives you more flexibility if you don't quite perfect the exposure in-camera.

When you are out shooting, it can be hard to see if the image is well exposed on your camera screen, particularly if you are in bright sunlight. This is where your histogram is useful. The histogram is a graphical representation of the brightness of the pixels in your image. The graph shows dark pixels on the left and bright pixels on the right. The height of the trace shows how many pixels are present at each brightness level.

If you have a spike of pixels at the black-end of the histogram, you will not be exposing detail in the shadows and therefore you won't have much leeway to brighten the image on the computer.

Likewise, if pixels are bunched at the right of the histogram, you will probably be losing detail in the highlights. You should aim to expose your image so that the majority of the pixels fall in the middle zone of the histogram and you aren't clipping details in the highlights or shadows.

Check your camera manual if you are not sure how to view the histogram display.



An elephant bull blows a dust bath for himself in Amboseli National Park, Kenya. March 2022.

Process Your Images

Unfortunately, in reality, the images you get straight out of your camera are not as good as they could be. You really need to tweak aspects such as saturation, colours, brightness and contrast in order to get them to “pop”.

I use mainly Adobe Lightroom to process my images and I highly recommend it.

As with many things, practice helps when it comes to image processing. It used to take me ages to process my images and even then they didn't turn out very well. Now, after years of practice, I am much quicker and know more instinctively what adjustments I need to make. The best way to learn and improve is to dive in and experiment. Also, make use of black & white photography. Sometimes it may make the photo even more powerful than in color.

And remember that the learning never stops!

Now go out there to take great wildlife photographs!



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**THANK YOU FOR DOWNLOADING THIS EBOOK!
I hope that it will inspire you and that you will have fun moments in nature.**

