



NEIL ALDRIDGE

For over a decade, Neil Aldridge has travelled a long and often lonely path to project his work away from the typical wildlife photography pigeonhole. Now, as he tells Keith Wilson, his brand of conservation photojournalism is proving to be more in demand than ever...

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY is changing. Today, a greater number of photographers are devoting time to covering environmental issues rather than joining the throng of morning commuters on safari game drives. Although wildlife remains their focus, some no longer call themselves wildlife photographers – now they prefer to be known as conservation photographers. For Neil Aldridge, this shift in direction is a long-awaited validation of the lonely path he first trod in 2009. That was the year he established his brand by registering the name ‘conservation photojournalism’ with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. “In fact, it probably had its roots back in 2005 when I did my wildlife guide training in Africa, taking a lot of photos, doing a lot of wildlife photography,” he recalls.

Back then, the young South African was photographing conservationists

01 TOWARDS THE FRONTLINE

This photo was taken as the Botswana government disbanded anti-poaching teams and resumed discussions to lift the ban on commercial elephant hunting

Lens Canon EF 400mm f/2.8L IS USM

Exposure 1/2000 sec, f/4, ISO800

02 GUARDING THE MOST WANTED

A ground pangolin sticks close to the security of an anti-poaching guard at a rehabilitation facility in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Pangolins are the world's most poached wild mammal

Lens Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM

Exposure 1/80 sec, f/11, ISO200

03 NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

The view from a flat as a fox searches for food in a courtyard in West London

Lens Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM

Exposure 1.6 sec, f/7.1, ISO1250

04 THE NIGHT STALKER

With the orange glow of Bristol's lights colouring the sky beyond, a young fox searches for food on a winter's night

Lens Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM + flash

Exposure 30 secs, f/9, ISO400

working with endangered African wild dogs. A contract with the Wildlife Trusts in the UK followed and when that finished in 2008, Neil decided to do a master's degree in photojournalism in London. "I went into photojournalism because I wanted to tell stories about conservation," he says. "Yes, wildlife was at the heart of that, but I didn't want to do just the wildlife stuff, I didn't want to be in that bubble in Africa. I went to London because I wanted to learn how to photograph people, I wanted to learn how to tell stories."

Have you always been a storyteller inside?

I don't know if I have. Ironically, I was doing a talk last week online at a conference and the past editor of *Getaway* magazine, Don Pinnock, was hosting the panel. He was editor when I was growing up as a teenager and I wanted to be a photojournalist because I saw the work that the photographers in *Getaway* were doing. So, I had this idea already, I didn't want to go and just take one picture, I wanted to create magazine features and stories, but in my heart I still love the challenge of wildlife photography and I would love to do more of it. I just have this idea that I want to make a difference.

"If I want someone to understand something then there needs to be a narrative"



It sounds so clichéd, but everything that I do is focused on making a difference. If I want someone to understand something then there needs to be a narrative, even if it's within one picture.

Can you give me an example of such a picture?

It might be one story within one shot, like the rhino image in *World Press Photo* (see page 67). There's lots in that one image that gets people talking and thinking – these are the sorts of things that engage people in a single image – but there are some, like the fox, where there are too many elements to wrap up and you need

to approach this subject with a storytelling mindset. You need to have a shot list, you need to plan, and I enjoy that approach; I plan the shot and I think, 'what elements need to be in the image to communicate the factors within this story that people need to know?'

Yes, it sounds almost like constructing a storyboard...

Yes, very much so. Like with the picture of the sab (a hunt saboteur who had his skull fractured during a fox hunt) sitting on the bed (see page 64). I had to plan that, I brought all the lights that I thought I would need. Okay, I didn't know the



04

layout of his house, but I knew what I wanted. I needed to isolate the scar on his head but show him in his surroundings, and I needed to make that work photographically. It's a craft.

It's beautifully framed and lit. It's a picture that asks you to look closer.

That's what I wanted to do. I did take a side-on shot with that framing, but in that case it's just a head with a scar, it doesn't tell that story. Of course, people will ask, 'where's that come from', and you could easily have that in the caption, but to step back and place the person in their surroundings – this is someone who doesn't go out, sadly, someone who is very conscious of their head and their appearance.

Speaking of the rhino photo, what was your thinking behind that?

It's one of those things where there's so much going on and you're having to watch your back the whole time... On the day there were more than 20 rhinos being moved and you had to watch out that you weren't about to be run over by a rhino! I don't like to stand back, I like to get in front. I like to get the action coming towards me, because then you see the people involved, the faces. It was a crazy day. It was incredibly hot, a long day on your feet, dusty, thirsty, and just having your wits about you all the time. And, to be honest, not much time to think, not much time to plan.

STORY BEHIND THE SHOT



FLY BY NIGHT

Neil's award-winning photo of a lesser horseshoe bat flying overhead required meticulous planning to execute...

They were sharing the same roost as some grey long-eared bats in a barn on a farm in Devon, but you don't know when they're coming out and it's all shot with red light filters. You hear the camera go, but you don't know if the bat's in frame because it's flying so fast. This is the

'prey-eye view', what a moth sitting on some grass would see as this bat hunts. The shot was taken with an EF 16-35mm at f/2.8L. It needed to be wide enough to get that rim of grass. I bought some camera traps specifically because they were fast enough to trigger when the bats fly through. You put the camera on 30 seconds rolling exposure, lock it with a cable release and let it run. When a bat flies through the flashes go off. I had nine flashes. It took months to get right... The cherry on the top is keeping the shutter open for 30 seconds to get some stars in the sky above.

“I feel there’s a huge injustice here with regards to creatures like badgers and foxes”

Okay, no time to plan, but it won a World Press Photo award, so how did you photograph it?

It was one of those where you take just one camera, one lens and a flash and that’s it for the day. There’s no changing of kit, there’s no time to do any of that. I needed to get out of the boma (an animal enclosure) to get ready to photograph the next rhino coming, but I looked back and (saw) there was no-one else in that boma...

This translocation was supported by maybe 100 people – vets, rangers and support crew, drivers and helicopter pilots – so to have that moment where no-one was in that boma was rare. I’m glad that I looked back and saw that because everyone likes the excitement of a translocation, that’s what all photographers and film-makers want to capture; it’s exciting, it’s the big release, whereas this (picture) is contemplative. It’s that quiet moment before the excitement of this new start in life for this rhino, but at the same time it speaks to what it’s gone through in terms of having come from South Africa, where it was in a poaching hotspot, all the way up (to Botswana). To move it takes a huge amount of effort. It’s been heavily sedated the whole way. It’s a huge logistical mission to get these animals up there.

To anyone unfamiliar with the context there might be a mixed message because of the blindfold. Did that cross your mind at all?

I think the way people responded to it was probably a result of being used to hearing negative stories about rhinos the whole time, and here is this rhino lying against a wall which has smears – is that a blood smear, or is it paint? You’re not quite sure, it looks gritty and it doesn’t look clean and nice. There’s none of that excitement with everyone stood behind drinking beers, going, ‘Yay! What a success.’ It still asks questions.

That’s what I like about it, it’s not that obvious, so it makes people read the caption. Afterwards, people would copy me in on Instagram and other platforms and tag me in the comments and most



people were reading the story and fascinated by the story, but there were some who just looked at the picture and said, ‘Oh, this is very sad.’

You were limited to one camera and one lens and your wits, so what lens did you use?

It was an EF 16-35mm f/2.8L. It’s my go-to lens, it was on a full-frame 5D Mark II. Wide enough to get close to the action and pick up some of the expressions on people’s faces. It’s only a little bit of zoom but it gives you the ability to compose, to step back or just crop in. You’re working at close quarters with people and the animals, and for me it was the ideal lens to work with.

You are focusing on British wildlife now after cutting your teeth on African wildlife, so why the switch?

There are a number of factors. One of the big drivers is that there are a lot of people who love Africa and go to Africa, and that’s fine, but there are so many people doing that these days. Although it’s a hard decision, Africa doesn’t need me to go to Africa to photograph rhinos or elephants, there are other people who can do that. But if someone commissions me to go and I felt I could make a difference, like with the pangolins, then of course I would.

The UK is in the bottom 10 per cent globally in terms of biodiversity intactness and that’s depressing.



07

It's not just from historical decisions, it's because we're seeing decisions being made day to day that are impacting still on the few remnants of habitat and wild spaces, and the species here are all struggling in many ways. I want to make a difference and I feel I can do that here. It doesn't mean I'm never going to photograph overseas again, but I feel there's a huge injustice here with regards to creatures like badgers and foxes. They're close to my heart.

Speaking of foxes, you have been working with two other photographers on a new book about foxes. How did that materialize?

Matt Maran asked me to be on his podcast and I knew he had been working on foxes. Over lunch we chatted about our fox work and then he asked me if I had thought about doing more with it, because I had photographed quite deeply and broadly on the subject for years. I was thinking the work does lend itself quite well to a book and the ideal situation would be working with someone like Matt, who is doing the kind of work that will interest audiences more with shots of foxes and how they interact with us, as opposed to the more controversial

issues which I was shooting. I had already decided not to do a fox book myself, but hadn't ruled out collaborating, so it happened pretty quickly over that pre-interview lunch. We said, 'Okay, let's see if Andy (Parkinson) is up for it.' Most people in the UK have done urban foxes, but there weren't many people who had done as much work on countryside foxes as Andy. It seemed like Matt, Andy and myself had that good mix. Matt approached Andy and within a few days it was a thing!

I haven't seen a more complete body of work and photographic evaluation about foxes in Britain.

Hopefully, other photographers will look at the book and think, 'Maybe we should be collaborating more', because it worked very well with the three of us. I think there should be more collaborations, pooling resources, pooling strengths, portfolios. Fortunately, we didn't have any real difficulties with regards to how our work was used. I was happy for my work to sit around the other two.

What is your core Canon camera kit that you always use?

It's still the Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L lens. It's the main one that gets stuck on

05 FOLLOWING THE SCENT

A fox hunt makes its way through farmland in West Sussex

Lens Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM + flash

Exposure 1/50 sec, f/9, ISO400

06 TIME TO HEAL

A fox baring the scars of a recent dog attack looks out from the safety of her rehabilitation kennel at a secure location in Kent. She eventually made a full recovery and was returned to the wild

Lens Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM

Exposure 1/100 sec, f/9, ISO640

07 SCARRED FOR LIFE

A former hunt saboteur lives with the visible scars of reconstructive surgery after his skull and eye socket were fractured during an attack by a huntsman

Lens Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM + flash

Exposure 0.6 sec, f/7.1, ISO320

“The UK is in the bottom 10 per cent globally in terms of biodiversity intactness”

08 FATHER & SON

A moment of intimacy at the Northern Tuli Game Reserve, Botswana

Lens Canon EF 400mm f/2.8L IS USM + Extender EF 2x

Exposure 1/320 sec, f/5.6, ISO400

09 ZEBRA STRIPES

Neil's opted for a long telephoto for this frame filling profile of a South African plains zebra

Lens Canon EF 400mm f/2.8L IS USM + Extender EF 1.4x

Exposure 1/100 sec, f/4, ISO800

10 WAITING FOR FREEDOM

Neil's World Press Photo winning image of a white rhino, blindfolded and sedated as it waits to be released into the wild

Lens Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM

Exposure 1/100 sec, f/8, ISO500

“I’m never going to buy a brand-new, top-of-the-range camera nowadays!”

an EOS 5DS, which is 50-odd megapixels. It's an absolute joy to work with. I'm never going to buy a brand-new, top of the range camera nowadays, I don't feel like I need to. I don't need the frame rates.

There aren't many jobs where I need to lock onto the eye of a hummingbird 400 metres away and shoot at 25 frames per second! I don't need that. The photography I do is largely single frame, you're just trying to get it right in one. You don't need frame rates. The 5DS is ideal for me.

What about flash?

I like to use lighting wherever I can. I like to use a bit of fill flash, so I have these little wireless transmitters on top of the camera and free hold the flash, and that's my go-to setup. Battery grip always as well, just for that extra battery life. Fortunately, I've got big enough hands – you need that extra stability to be able to shoot one-handed while you're holding the flash out as well. I'm never shooting two-handed ever.

I've also got a Canon EF 400mm f/2.8L IS USM, which I've had for years. It's a beautiful lens, it's heavy, it's big and the image quality is fantastic, but I'm never using it that much. You might use it for one image, that key shot of a portrait of a subject that's the opener, and then

08



everything else you shoot might be your wider or mid-range shots.

A lot of your images include people in the frame, so we're talking about wide-angles more than anything else?

Exactly. In the past I was guilty of going too wide and now I'm trying to get in a little bit tighter, and that's with the EF 50mm f/1.8, particularly if you're shooting indoors with horrible lighting conditions. That's why the most important bit of kit I have is a polarizing filter – they're glued on the front of every single lens. Not enough photographers use them. A lot of people rely on Photoshop afterwards, but you just can't

replicate the effects that they have to control glare – whether it's a metal sink where vets might be washing an animal, also the way natural light reflects off wet leaves and things like that. I'm a big fan of a polarizer. I know you lose a couple of stops, but nowadays the ISO performance is so much better that you can counter that. They're a key bit of kit for me.

You've won a lot of major awards. How important are awards? Are there too many?

There probably are too many and I think that devalues awards a little bit now. It's good for photographers to say, 'Hey, I've got recognition for this', but I don't pay a huge amount of attention to a lot of



09



PROFILE

Neil Aldridge

Conservation & wildlife photographer

Neil Aldridge is a conservationist, photographer and film-maker, as well as a professional wildlife guide, speaker and author. His work has been published by *National Geographic*, *BBC Wildlife* magazine, *Geo* and other leading platforms. Major projects include documenting efforts to save Africa's wild dogs, pangolins and rhinos, as well as stories from the British countryside about the controversial badger cull, pheasant shooting and our relationship with foxes. In 2019, Neil was commissioned by Wildscreen to create 21 films for the innovative Back from the Brink project about England's most threatened wildlife. He has contributed to several collaborative projects, including the influential *Photographers Against Wildlife Crime* books. In 2021, his image was used on the cover of *Remembering African Wild Dogs*, which raised funds for frontline conservation efforts. A former South African international rower, Neil holds a masters degree in photojournalism from the University of the Arts London. His photography has been awarded major prizes in Nature Photographer of the Year, Pictures of the Year International, the overall title of European Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2014, and category winner in the 2018 World Press Photo awards.

www.conservationphotojournalism.com



10

different awards and contests that are out there. I'm not sure enough photographers do this, but it's really a case of looking at the audience, where the image is going to be used, who's the audience.

Something like World Press Photo has a huge audience. The number of people who saw that rhino story and the response to it... when I won there wasn't a financial award, but that didn't bother me. A lot of people believe that you only enter the contest for the prize. Well, to me the prize is getting your work seen, it's getting your work out there, that's the real value because I want people to see and respond to the images that I take.

In those photographs, there are people working on the front line with very little funding, with hardly any time

off. They're saving species and doing fantastic things and they need to be appreciated, respected and they need to be seen. Their stories need to be told just as much as the wildlife subjects that they're working with, and competitions are a great platform for them. 🐾

Neighbour Villain Icon

Neil is the co-author (with Matt Maran and Andy Parkinson) of the new photo book, *FOX: Neighbour Villain Icon*, which launches at the Natural History Museum, London, in April. Priced at £35, you can order your copy now at: www.foxbook.shop

