

Elliott Neep

When he's not prowling in the twilight for badgers near his Oxfordshire home, **Elliott Neep** will be leading wildlife photography tours to the Mara-Serengeti, Antarctica and Svalbard. Like the varied terrain he now covers, the road from redundancy to award-winning photographer had many twists and small returns. But he has never felt happier or more committed to a role that he sees as vital to the future of wildlife.

Interview by Keith Wilson

**A baby mountain gorilla peers
through the undergrowth,
Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda**
*Nikon D3S with Nikkor 200-400mm
f/4 VR zoom at 380mm, ISO 800,
1/250sec at f/5.6*

You became a photographer after being made redundant. What was your line of work before?

I had been in IT sales then IT marketing with Intel. After I was made redundant I worked for an IT recruitment company, doing all their online marketing. The role turned into business analyst and internet analyst, I built them an intranet. I was working ridiculous hours and they sent me on a training course. Somewhere between going on the training course and coming back I got meningitis. I was off for several weeks and when I came back I was told my services were no longer required. I spent the next six months recuperating and moved back with my parents. It was during that period that I took my dog for a walk in the woods and stole my Dad’s Canon T90. He memorably said, ‘You’re never going to make a living photographing frost and berries and fungi and insects’, but that’s how it started. I then built the website with the skills I had learnt already. And put the images on line.

What year was this?

It was 2002. In those six months I was recuperating I was photographing every day and learnt so much that I got a job with a property development company in London, two months on, one month off, photographing properties, hotels and restaurants, getting a regular income and having a month off to travel. I did that for about two years and in 2005 I got an award for a tiger picture in Wildlife Photographer of the Year and a contract with Oxford Scientific Films and that’s when I switched full time to wildlife photography. And that’s when I went from having a really great income to none, for a long time!

But had you always been interested in wildlife as a child?

Yes. I grew up on the David Attenborough diet. I would scream at my parents if they spoke a single word while Wildlife on One was on. I was a bit of a mental sponge when those shows were on. If someone had said at school that you could make a living working with animals I probably would have studied zoology and not computer studies.

What did you study at university?

Business. It was a complete waste of time.

Even now?

Yes. My friends say I’m a good photographer but a useless businessman.

But you got your internet skills into play effectively and quickly?

Yes. I started the wildlife photography just as digital was becoming mainstream with SLRs like the Canon EOS 10D. The only advantage I had then was that I was able to get everything online and I understood that mechanism and use it sooner than most. That was one advantage I had.



Polar bears feeding on a seal carcass, Svalbard
Nikon D800E with Nikkor 600mm f/4, ISO 400, 1/800sec at f/4

So you decided to become a professional wildlife photographer. In your mind, where did you think the income was going to come from?

I had no idea. In my heart I was hoping it was going to be from selling images of tigers, which I love so much, but so many other people have done it so well. Oxford Scientific Films told me that if I wanted to make money I should photograph cats in baskets, puppy dogs and things like that and I just said, ‘No!’ I just kept saying, ‘Tell me what you need, I’m still learning, I’ll photograph anything except cats in baskets and puppy dogs.’ So I concentrated on British mammals. I did lots of red foxes and hares and badgers, stuff that had been done before but hadn’t been done really good for a while. I dedicated the next three or four years just photographing British wildlife.

What are the most essential lenses to your wildlife photography?

Good question. If I look at my images in Lightroom, 70 to 80 per cent is done on the 600mm f/4. I suppose it’s because I do lots of safari, lots of wary British wildlife

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that’s difficult to get close on, but then I have quite a lot of images shot on the 16-35mm, so I’m either all the way out and close-up, or all the way in.

So it is possible to take great wildlife imagery without a telephoto lens?

Absolutely. It just requires more skill and more patience. And it depends on what you’re photographing. You can rock up to a lion on the Masai Mara with a 24-70mm and probably get something worth looking at.

Is that because the lions have become so accustomed to all the vehicles?



Polar bear, Svalbard
Nikon D3S with 200-400mm f/4 VR, ISO 400, 1/1000sec at f/8

Absolutely. I was at a wedding a couple of weeks ago and there was a woman from Botswana there and we had this running joke: ‘There are no lions in East Africa, they are all fakes, they are all robots. I want to see proper lions that you have to track and wait for.’ It’s because all the lions in East Africa are so accustomed to vehicles, you virtually roll right over their whiskers. They’re permanently asleep, or walk right next to the car. Cheetahs will sit on your bonnet.

Wouldn’t you prefer to track in locations where the cats are far more elusive, to have the challenge of only squeezing out a few shots with the 600mm? Wouldn’t that be more rewarding than shooting close from a car?

For the naturalist in me I agree 100 per cent. For the professional photographer who is trying to make a living, a rewarding feeling is tempered by finance. It’s the reason I do less and less British wildlife because it can take me two months to get some decent pictures of badgers or staking out a vixen’s den to get pictures of fox cubs, or stalking roe deer. I can be in the Mara in 24 hours getting

pictures of lions that I know will sell and it takes so little time. I love to do badgers, I love to do British wildlife, but it's not profitable for me. I would love to go to Namibia and do the desert lions and spend a week looking for them, or in Svalbard looking for polar bears.

So the appeal of the Mara-Serengeti is not wearing off, even though the challenge is becoming less so?

I suppose the challenge of photographing the animals has disappeared, but the challenge of photographing them differently or demonstrating rare behaviours is still there, it always has been. I have 1500 pictures of lions and cheetahs, but I'll still go back every year to Tanzania or the Mara, not to just photograph the first things I see, but I'll be waiting for some special moment, some interaction between the animals, something unique that's worth photographing.

Who are the other photographers that you gain inspiration from, whose work you always look out for and admire?

Nick Nichols, Paul Nicklen and about a hundred other pros and amateurs. I'm always taking inspiration from everywhere. What I enjoy and really get a kick out of is when I do the safaris, and it could be with someone who's on their first safari, and they take a photograph, say of a giraffe, and it's so original because, whether it's a mistake, or it's their point of view of how a giraffe should look, or that's the angle they've taken it, I'll look at it and go, 'That's really good, that's amazing. I wish I'd taken that!' It happens every time.

What is your favourite location in the world for photographing wildlife?

That's difficult, I've got three! Obviously, the Mara-Serengeti. Also Svalbard and Antarctica, although I haven't been there nearly enough times.

How many times have you been to the Mara-Serengeti now?

Not really sure. More than ten, less than twenty.

Do you worry that the Mara-Serengeti is under too much pressure from safaris and tourist development?

Yes. Although it doesn't seem to be spiraling out of control, in the Masai Mara game reserve they've put a halt to any more development. Any development is in the conservancies, which are like regional peripheries that surround the game reserve. The one region in the Mara which I think is a problem is Talek because along the Talek and Mara River confluences, there are temporary camp sites that were supposed to be public



A mother cheetah and a juvenile male rest on a termite mound in the pouring rain, Masai Mara, Kenya
Nikon D3S with Nikkor 600mm f/4, ISO 200, 1/250sec at f/5.6

so you could just pull up in your vehicle and camp. Now, camp operators are taking over those sites and putting up temporary luxury camps. With every temporary luxury camp you have another six to ten vehicles, which are driven by people from the local villages who have no real appreciation for the wildlife. They're basically ferrying people around like taxi drivers in vehicles that often break down, or get stuck, or drive too close to animals. I have seen someone run over leopard cubs in long grass. That's an issue.

You're a supporter of the Environmental Investigation Agency. How do you support them and how do they make a difference to wildlife conservation?

I wish I had money to donate, but I don't. But I do have my images, so earlier this year I said to the Wildlife Trusts and the EIA you can use any of my images for whatever you want, free of charge, just not for resale. All your promotional, marketing, fund raising needs, everything. They were really appreciative, so I've just

given them free access to my website, they download what they need. All I ask for in return is a copy of the artwork for my own records. I think it's gone very well. EIA used some of my tiger pictures for a track a tiger two-week fund raising event in London. To my mind the EIA is one of the most cost effective and efficient NGOs there is. They're really not afraid of politics. They go in under cover, they have secretly filmed illegal logging, whaling, deforestation, orangutan, elephant and rhino poaching. I just think they're amazing. They have had



A juvenile male cheetah learning to hunt, leaping on an infant Tommy fawn, Masai Mara, Kenya
Nikon D3S with Nikkor 600mm f/4, ISO 400, 1/2000sec at f/5.6



Dozens of wildebeest and zebra launch into the Mara River during the annual migration, Masai Mara, Kenya
Canon EOS-1D Mark IV with EF 600mm f/4, ISO 400, 1/1600sec at f/4

some real breakthroughs and made some real sacrifices as well. I know one of their undercover agents was shot dead in Kaziranga because he was researching rhino and tiger poaching and the culprits turned up at his house and shot him.

What have been some of the successes?

There are so many. They're very good on lobbying. They revealed how products from illegal logging were making their way onto British high streets. They closed that down. I wish they would have some success with the tigers.

What's your concern about the tigers?

This is where I decide whether to be controversial or not. Everyone knows that tigers are in trouble. WWF keep quoting this tiger census of about three and a half thousand. So that's based on a census of Bengal tigers that was done in the 1970s and is completely inaccurate. It was based on pug marks. No visible sightings, no radio tagging, just counting pug marks. Realistically, there's less than a thousand Bengal tigers in India, going by how much forest is left. My other major concern is that the government department in India that is responsible for tigers is the same department that is responsible for logging. So the forest department find the tiger is

a complete liability, it costs them millions to manage, because all they really want to do is deforest and manage the woodland, but they have to deal with any tigers in their domain and all the tourist stuff as well.

How important are wildlife photographers to the success of the conservation movement?

Unfortunately, there's not enough of us earning enough to be able to sacrifice our images for free use, doing talks for free. I wouldn't say it's essentially important because there are lots of researchers who can take decent pictures. Saying that, we have our place. We can take good pictures that are emotive and good for fund raising, poster pictures and things like that. Obviously, the world famous wildlife photographers like Frans Lanting, Tom Mangelsen and Art Wolfe have a huge audience, so they've got a big voice and the more those guys and others like them can use that voice for conservation, the better. Frans Lanting does lots of great work for WWF and other conservation partners, but for most of us, I don't have the money to give freely.

"I genuinely believe the more passionate and knowledgeable you are about wildlife the better the wildlife photographer you will be"

But surely the access to your images is a better contribution to make anyway?

Well, I hope so. It's like that saying: give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime. My idea was rather than donate £10 a month, why not let the EIA and Wildlife Trusts use these pictures that can earn more for fundraising.

Which animal has been the most difficult to photograph?

Badgers. They're nocturnal after all and I don't like flash either, I find it almost intrusive. This animal has its pupils wide open and then bang, it's blinded. There are points when the badger comes out in the day, when there are cubs coming out for the first time, or if it's a particularly quiet area, or on warm summer evenings they might come out in the last hour of daylight. In 2009 I spent two months in a wood, the same wood, at a national nature reserve near Stokenchurch. I was coming back every night, and every day, sat by a badger sett, waiting hours, weeks, for them to emerge. And they

did. I managed to get some really nice photographs of young badgers climbing over logs. I was laying peanuts and honey in certain places. I found the sett by accident. I was walking out in the middle of the day and a badger just dashed past across a path and I found the sett nearby, so that became my home for the next two months.

Which animal you haven't yet captured would you most like to photograph?

Probably wolves.

Which type?

Arctic wolves, timber wolves, I don't mind.

Why wolves? They don't get a good press in terms of our culture.

It's weird isn't it, people love lions and tigers, but a big dog that is equally powerful and an intelligent hunter is not revered, but hated. To me, along with the polar bear, wolves are the epitome of wild. It's not about being cute and fluffy and beautiful and easily accessible. It's basically something that survives on the edge of the planet, on the edge of our civilization and beyond, and is completely independent. It's a small family unit in the case of the wolves, completely independent in the case of the polar bear.



A Bengal tiger resting, yet fully alert to the camera, Bandhavgarh, India
Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II with EF 200mm f/2.8, ISO 200, 1/250sec at f/2.8

A red deer stag roaring in the mist at sunrise, England
Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II with EF600mm f/4 , ISO 400, 1/640sec at f/6.3





A female Bengal tiger shows her displeasure to the camera
Canon EOS 10D, 75-300mm f/4.5-5.6, ISO 200, 1/400sec at f/6.3

“I shoot very simply, I’m not into gadgets and when I travel, it’s just camera and lens, a good tripod, a good tripod head and a beanbag. I don’t use filters. I very rarely use camera releases”

What has been the biggest lesson you have learnt as a wildlife photographer?

Timing is everything, It is what separates THE shot from the dross. It can be as subtle as a fleeting glimpse between a cub and its mother, or the mid-air collision between two fighting predators. Both have drama and a split second difference can make all the difference. I used to blaze away with my Nikon D3s bodies, but since switching to the slower D800E I have become much more deliberate and targeted with my shutter release. In essence, machine-gunning images can be

counter-productive. Aside from the camera and a trigger-happy finger, there is an aspect to timing that can only be learned by experience and knowing your subjects. The best examples happen on safari when my clients are eager to move on, but I know something is going to happen. I sense the mood and the posturing of the big cats. It is an insight that always pays off.

What equipment and accessories do you regard as essential to successful wildlife photography?

I shoot very simply, I’m not into gadgets and when I travel, it’s sometimes without a flashgun. It’s literally just camera and lens, a good tripod, a Gitzo, a good tripod head and a beanbag. I don’t use filters. I very rarely use camera releases. I use infrared camera traps, but that’s hardly a standard accessory.

What do you use them for?

Badgers and foxes. They are extremely difficult to set up and to do it well. Frankly, for all the time trying to get it right, I might as well be sitting there and being in control in the first place.

Do you do much photography from a hide?

Not any more. I used to have hides set up in woodlands to do birds and things like that, but most of my photography these days involves stalking. I stalk roe deer, lie in wait for hares. For a fox project I’d probably use a hide again, but for badgers there’s no point. It’s just patience. To be honest, when I shot foxes before I got better pictures by being out and familiarizing the foxes to me than photographing from a hide, because no matter what care I took in preparing the hide, they knew it was something completely alien. With so much British wildlife it’s about your scent.

When you’re out in the field what gear do you take?

It depends on which field!

Ok, when you’re on the Serengeti?

On safari, my standard kit bag is what I own. I’ve always kept my kit pretty streamlined, so I’ll have my two Nikon D800 bodies, 600mm f/4, 200-400mm f/4, 70-200mm f/2.8, and a 16-35mm f/2.8. I’d say 90 per cent of the time the 70-200mm stays on one camera and the 600mm f/4 stays on the other. If we get into things like a leopard in a tree, cats on a kill, animals moving very quickly, I’ll change lenses. But to avoid dust while changing lenses, sometimes it’s better to reposition the car than risk putting dust spots on your sensor.

And what will you take with you here in south Oxfordshire?

When I’m out in the field here, I’ll leave everything at home and take just one camera and one lens because

A curious gray langur monkey peers around a tree, Bandhavgarh, India
Canon EOS 1-Ds Mark II with EF 300mm f/2.8, ISO 400, 1/200sec at f/4





A lion cub about to be pulled back for more rough and tumble by its larger sibling, Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania
Nikon D3S with Nikkor 600mm f/4, ISO 800, 1/640sec at f/4

it's just too much trouble to rustle around in a bag. Either I'll have a camera and the 600mm lens on a tripod over my shoulder, or I'll have a camera with the 200-400mm on a strap around my neck. That's it. Sometime I might carry a kneeling pad.

What has been the biggest factor to your development as a wildlife photographer? What has made you better?

Practice. Also, I genuinely believe the more passionate and knowledgeable you are about wildlife the better the wildlife photographer you will be. Rather than the other way around. I know a lot of people who could talk a man to suicide with their technical knowledge of photography, but can't actually take a picture. It's ludicrous. I'm not a technical photographer. I'm instinctive. I shoot from intuition and instinct. I don't fiddle with the aperture.

Do you have any advice for people aspiring to be professional wildlife photographers?

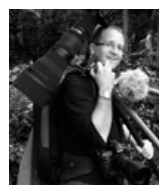
Don't. Give me a break, I've got enough competition! Seriously, don't throw your job in. Make sure you've got enough finance behind you to give yourself three to five years to establish yourself. I gave myself a five-

year plan in 2002 when there were probably only 10 per cent of the wildlife photographers as there are now in the UK. You have to be prepared to sacrifice social life, family life, sacrifice money. Become a hermit.

Any regrets?

None. I often say to friends I'm the poorest I've ever been but I'm the happiest.

"All the lions in East Africa are so accustomed to vehicles, you virtually roll right over their whiskers"



Elliott Neep is a safari guide and award-winning wildlife photographer best known for his photography of the big cats of the Mara-Serengeti. A former IT specialist, Elliott's clients include Getty Images, Minden Pictures, the Wildlife Trusts and the Environmental Investigation Agency.
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