

A marriage made in f/11

What is it like when you and your partner are both photographers? **Keith Wilson** speaks to three couples who have highly successful photographic marriages

Photography is often described as a solitary pursuit, undertaken by individuals answerable only to their own creative instincts. It's a description that suggests there is no place for another person's input, let alone teamwork. And as for social interaction, well, let's leave that for when the light's gone and it's time for a drink.

Now, however, an increasing number of 'photo couples' are gaining attention and critical recognition for their work. Last year, the wildlife and landscape

photographers Orsolya (Orsi) and Erlend Haarberg were keynote speakers at many of Europe's nature photography festivals as they presented images from their latest book, *Laponia—Majestic Stillness*. The book is the result of a three-year project documenting one of Europe's largest wilderness areas. Laponia is an area of Swedish Lapland, located above the Arctic Circle and accessible only on foot. The Haarbergs made many expeditions, camping for weeks at a time and carrying all their provisions, totally dependent upon each other. 'Luckily,



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Two female ptarmigans balancing on a snow-covered ledge, Sarek National Park, Laponia, Sweden
Nikon D800E, 300mm f/2.8, 1/1250sec at f/8, ISO 400



Erlend had made several visits to this area before, so we knew how far we could travel,' Orsi recalls. 'Our stays in the wilderness have been very challenging, but always achievable. For the sake of photography, sometimes we took chances, but luckily things always turned out right.'

Tents and trees

Their first time together in a tent wasn't quite so smooth – a few months after their first meeting in 2004 in his native Norway, Erlend took Orsi on a mountain hike to photograph reindeer. Orsi had recently arrived in the country from Hungary to undertake a PhD research scholarship in wildlife management. Erlend takes up the story: 'The first trip we had together almost became our last! This was an area where I have had many great experiences and I was eager to show her, but the trip did not go to plan. There was a lot of walking

with heavy backpacks, without finding any animals. The first day ended with a fierce quarrel about where we should place the tent. Not exactly a good start.'

The first meeting of British wildlife photographers Sarah and Andy Skinner was less onerous. Andy explains: 'Let's just say I never expected to meet my future wife while I was hanging from a tree.' It was 1996 and Andy was working as a professional arborist. 'Sarah had moved back from university to her mum's house. I had to carry out some pruning work to a tree opposite, and she came out and started cleaning her car. We made eye contact a few times and you could say it took a little longer than usual to carry out the pruning work.'

The Skinners have been married for 16 years, and it is their shared passion for nature and photography that has sustained their life together as leaders of photo safari tours, primarily to Botswana, Uganda and

India, through their company Images of Wildlife. While they work closely together, they maintain a stylistic difference with their photography, despite being drawn to the same subjects. Sarah explains: 'I love how Andy always likes to inject a creative style using different techniques, never afraid to take risks and experiment. This always results in some interesting images and compositions.' Andy continues: 'For me it's about how she captures a mood of a scene so beautifully and her wildlife portraits. This is where her love of wildlife shines through.'

The difference in styles is more marked with the Haarbergs. Erlend was already an established wildlife photographer before meeting Orsi, who has since earned wide acclaim for her landscapes. However, this obvious separation of subject interest doesn't mean they ignore each other's work. In fact, Erlend clearly admires his wife's approach: 'She doesn't do things by half. When she sees the

Siberian jay in the old pine forest of the Stora Sjöfallet National Park, Laponia, Sweden
Nikon D3S, 14-24mm f/2.8 at 14mm, 1/3200sec at f/11, ISO 1250



Orsolya and Erlend Haarberg are award-winning nature photographers based in northern Norway. Their latest book, *Laponia—Majestic Stillness*, can be ordered online, price €42, at www.haarbergphoto.com/laponia/en.

potential in a subject, she has unlimited patience to wait for the right conditions. Her perfectionism in every aspect of image making – from the planning phase, through field work to image processing – made me much more aware about my approach to my own work.'

For landscape photographers Ted Leeming and Morag Paterson, there is a more unified objective to their compositions as they seek to depict their surroundings as abstract impressions with a singular voice. Whether Ted or Morag triggers the shutter, their fine-art prints are all signed as 'Leeming + Paterson'. Their photography was markedly different when they first got together in 2006, but there was enough respect for each other's work for one to inspire and influence the other. Although Morag admits Ted's studies of smaller rivers and moss-clad trees influenced her later images, it is Ted who has experienced the

greater transformation in style since the couple began collaborating. He says: 'Morag showed me an entirely new way to look at the world, refusing to accept conventional thinking. Once I recognised this, it opened a whole new world for me.'

This joint interpretation of the landscape is best demonstrated by their 2014 book, *Zero Footprint*, a homage to the changing mood and light of the Glenkens in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland. Every image was taken from the same spot on their kitchen patio (hence the book's title) but the variances in light, season, weather, focal length and direction meant no two images were the same. Four years on, they continue to make abstract impressions of their surroundings, only this time from the Ligurian coast in north-west Italy.

Strengths and preferences

When on safari and confined to their vehicles, Sarah and Andy Skinner are also faced with the same subject to photograph, yet they try to avoid duplication. But, as Sarah admits, it does sometimes happen: 'I always know Andy will be keen to capture movement, and although I sometimes do the same we try to avoid doing this at the same time. Instead, I might focus on more environmental images. As a result, we often come out with very different images to each other at the same sighting.'

This recognition of each other's preferences is an important aspect for each of the couples to ensure the widest variety of images from a field trip, even when sharing the photo credit, as with the case of Leeming + Paterson. Morag



The evening sea at Albenga, Liguria, Italy
Canon EOS 5D Mark III, 100-400mm at 100mm, 0.4sec at f/16, ISO 100



Leeming + Paterson specialise in abstract representations of the landscape
Canon EOS 5D Mark III, 100-400mm at 400mm, 1/5sec at f/36, ISO 100

explains: 'We're quite good at divvying up a shoot when we have time pressures on a commission where we usually split [the work], with Ted taking the wider and more tripod-based shots, and me going for longer lens work and experimenting with motion blur. Having said that, we can inadvertently have a complete and unintended role reversal at times.'

Below left: 'The Onlookers' by Andy Skinner
Nikon D810, 200-400mm at 300mm, 1/5sec at f/11, ISO 72

Below right: 'Framed by a Giant' by Sarah Skinner
Nikon D500, 500mm f/4, 1/800sec at f/4, ISO 125

Such an empathic understanding of each other's viewpoint is no doubt essential for a smooth-running partnership, but when it comes to competitions and award success, doesn't rivalry sometimes get in the way of domestic harmony? The Haarbergs, who won more than 30 awards for their photography last year, including European Wildlife Photographer of the Year for Erlend,

are probably best placed to answer. Ever diplomatic, Orsi says: 'Awards are a positive feedback that are nice to receive, but we don't give them too much importance. We have different priorities and interests in photography, but we often share our goals and projects, so there is no reason to compete.' Sarah is a little bit more forthcoming: 'I would be lying if I said there wasn't a little

friendly competition between us. We feel that's healthy as it ensures we continue to push ourselves.'

Lens differences

Unsurprisingly, all three couples use the same camera systems – Ted and Morag shoot with Canon (although Ted also uses a Sony Alpha 7R II), while Andy, Sarah, Orsi and Erlend are Nikon users. Being wildlife photographers, Sarah and Andy both reach for long telephoto prime lenses before any other, but Andy prefers the Nikon 600mm f/4 FL ED VR to Sarah's Nikon 500mm f/4 FL ED VR, thereby avoiding an unseemly tussle over 'the big lens'. For Ted and Morag, there is a greater variance in lens choice that is indicative of their different ways of observing the same scene. 'Ted will have a few more at the wider end of things,' says Morag. 'He is seriously in love with his Zeiss 25mm and 55mm lenses, whereas more often I'm in the 100-400mm range.'

As they often camp in remote areas, Orsi and Erlend keep their equipment to a minimum and share their lenses, particularly the Nikon 105mm f/2.5 Micro, 12-24mm f/2.8



Sarah and Andy Skinner run wildlife photo safaris in Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, as well as in India and Canada. For bookings in 2019 see www.imagesofwildlife.co.uk.



Ted Leeming and Morag Paterson run workshops in Italy, Iceland and the Faroes. Founders of the Zero Footprints project www.zerofootprints.org, their book, *Zero Footprint*, is available from www.leemingpaterson.com

and 17-35mm f/2.8 zooms. But when it comes to their personal favourites, Orsi can't let go of his Nikon 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G ED VR. 'I love the VR function in the windy, low-light Scandinavian winter conditions,' she says. For Erlend, his focus on birds and mammals means his first choice is the Nikon 500mm f/4E FL ED VR.

So, with the gear divided and sorted, subject and vantage point decided and tent site agreed before the pegs are nailed, is there any other key advice our couples would give to partners wanting to press the shutter together? Andy Skinner takes the plunge: 'Don't be afraid to be totally open with each other and give constructive criticism of each other's work – always be honest. It's about recognising that it's perfectly OK to say to your partner you may not like an image, as long as you can articulate the reasons why. After all, photography is very subjective. Above all, never take your partner's feedback personally. We apply this very piece of advice when we are choosing images for our website – then, it's about the merits of an image and not who took it.'

Clouds swirl around the slopes of the Ligurian Maritime Alps in Italy
Sony A7R II, 100-400mm at 130mm, 1/3200sec at f/8, ISO 50

