

Greg Du Toit

Last month Greg du Toit was propelled into the spotlight when he was named Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2013. Winning the greatest award in wildlife photography from more than 43,000 entries coincided with the publication of his first book, *African Wildlife Exposed*. So where does he go from here, and exactly how did he capture his artistic and mysterious, award-winning photograph? Interview by **Keith Wilson**

Essence of Elephants

Greg's winning image of a herd of elephants at a waterhole in Botswana, taken just after sunrise. The elephant closest to camera is a baby female, barely a year old, and standing little more than a metre high, yet made to appear enormous by Greg's low viewpoint and use of a wideangle lens. Nikon D3 s with Nikkor 16-35mm f/4 lens, polarizing filter, ISO 800, 1/30sec at f/22, Nikon SB900 flash and SC28 remote cord, tripod and remote release

Interview

Can you tell me how you got yourself into this position to take your award-winning picture?

Well it's a hide that was built by a friend of mine called Shem Compion, and it's a freight container that we sunk into the ground so that we're able to shoot eye level, which in this case means we're shooting right at the toenails of the elephants.

How well did you know this waterhole?

I know it well. I used to live and work in this part of Botswana and I've been going there for over a decade now, so I know the place well and I know the animals well and I know the elephants well.

So the elephants are familiar to you and habituated to your presence?

Yes. The Northern Tuli Game Reserve of Botswana is a safe refuge for elephants. They have been persecuted on all

sides, especially from the Zimbabwe border, and they've been persecuted by farmers on the South African side and just north of the game reserve where there are lots of villages and towns. So these elephants they know they're safe there, it's a safe haven for them. I wouldn't use the word habituated with elephants simply because they are just so intelligent and they are free ranging, but they know that in that game reserve man means them no harm.

What time of day was it?

It's just after sunrise.

How did you get this blue cast to the light?

I used a polarising filter, but there were two other things. The polarizing filter helps to accentuate the blues and bring out those funny greens that you see at the back. I used a flash and my flash is quite a cold light, so that helped with the blue cast.

Was that off-camera flash?

Yes, it was off-camera flash, just coming in from the bottom left hand side. I only ever use one. I set my white balance manually just to keep it cool, because if I had left it on auto the camera would have set a higher Kelvin temperature than I wanted.

What setting did you use?

I wanted to create a mysterious image you see, so that's what I really wanted to do, so I went to manual where you can set the Kelvin temperature to whatever you like and I think I set it to 3,300.

Quite cool then?

Yes, I wanted it slightly cooler than daylight you see, which is around 5,000 So, that was my thinking and with this competition you've got to do the thinking in camera. It's very easy to change white balance

later and go onto computer afterwards and play around with it, but they ask for the Raw file and thankfully the Raw file has this blue cast too. If it wasn't for that then I probably wouldn't be standing here. So these small decisions in the field can make a big difference.

Were you always interested in wildlife as a young boy?

Absolutely. Where I grew up in Pretoria, down the road there was a bird sanctuary, and I would rush back home from school and go to the closest bookstore and just read bird books. I'd hang out at the bird sanctuary, or be in the bookstore, reading the books. I built bird feeders at home. I've always loved nature, so straight after leaving secondary school I went to the bush and started living and working there.

Twilight herd

Greg often talks of the energy he feels around elephants and the mystery they convey with their presence. "A herd can move so lightly and swiftly that they defy our human hearing," he says. "In the twilight they become ghostlike. Lying of the ground and having this breeding herd whisper past me was a definite highlight of my career."



Interview

What was your first job?

My first job was just as a camp hand, you know. I was just there to dig holes and fix roads and collect firewood. I wasn't being paid. I'd just work for my keep, so that's how it started.

When did the interest in photography start?

Well, I was quite fortunate. I started working for a company called Africam, and we were filming wildlife for the Internet as it was just becoming big. I was seeing amazing things and basically going on safari drive all day just filming whatever we could. I wanted to share what I was seeing with friends and family and that's when the idea of getting a camera popped into my head, so I bought a secondhand Pentax camera. From the first time I picked it up, it just sort of clicked, it was like something that I really took seriously, you know, and I really wanted to take to.

Was it digital straight away?

No that was film. I started on colour negative film and only in 2007 did I switch from slide film to digital.

What cameras do you use now?

I use the Nikon 35mm full frame system.



Right: Wild Lioness

Greg spent a total of 270 hours over many months immersed in a waterhole in the heart of Maasailand photographing lions and other wildlife coming to drink. "I never used a remote trigger because I wanted vertical and horizontal shots," he says. But his health suffered for this unique perspective: "I contracted bilharzia, malaria and other tropical parasitic illnesses, many of which enter the water through baboon urine and faeces. However, this image is well worth the 16 months it took me to get it. She was just one leap away"

There was an incident involving elephants that changed your emphasis in the way you work. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Sure. When we lived in southern Tanzania, we were based down there for two years, I was trying to do a portfolio on Ruaha National Park. We had a young elephant bull who lived in camp and we called him Skewtusk because he had two tusks that were bent. He adopted us as his herd, so he just hung around in camp. He would sleep next to the house at night and snore and my wife and I would need to sleep with pillows on our head. But there was some dispute as to who was the boss and I had numerous run-ins with him, but one day I had two near fatal run-ins with him, all in the same afternoon, where he just charged me. I was trying to fix his little waterhole, but he saw me being at his waterhole as a sort of dominance thing, so he charged and I just narrowly escaped. Unfortunately, my wife saw the whole incident because it happened on the plain just in front of our house and she then said she couldn't handle me taking all these risks. That was when we decided to move back to Pretoria and live in a city, but pursue a full-time career as a wildlife photographer working across the continent. That was since 2008 and it's worked out well.

African Wildlife Exposed has just been published. Is that your first book of photographs?

Yes it's my first book, but it's ten years worth of work and I've averaged about 30 images per year. I really wanted to do a book that does the continent of Africa justice because I think it's an amazing continent with amazing animals. I didn't want to rush a book out, so it's taken me ten years to do.

Left: Simple Stealth

Leopards are the hardest of the big cats to photograph, solitary, silent and elusive. "One of the hardest frames to capture has been one that illustrates the ease and stealth at which leopards move through the dense bush," says Greg. "For this image, I zoomed out gently while panning with my subject – by combining both techniques in a single frame, I finally achieved the desired result"



Interview

King of the Mara
"On the plains of Kenya's Masai Mara there is a king called Notch and together with his four sons they rule the land and have produced numerous offspring. Although part of a formidable coalition, Notch often roams alone and here you see him regally seated, staring across the vast plains"



Twilight Pelican

Greg was camping on the floor of Kenya's Rift Valley by this lake when day turned to night as these pelicans flew in to roost. "A burst from my flash was just powerful enough to make out one of the last stragglers, and the smallest amount of ambient light reflected off the valley wall in the background"



In the Simien Mountains of Ethiopia, Greg thought the only shot that would do these beautiful primates justice would be a wideangle view. "Lying in front of this male, I pressed my ear hard to the ground to get as low as possible," he says. "Of all the wonderful primates in Africa, these remain my favourite"



Interview

How extensive is the coverage of Africa in your book?

It goes from Ethiopia, just north of the equator, all the way down to South Africa, so it’s mainly eastern Africa and southern Africa. It’s got lots of macro shots in too, so I’ve got the small things, the big things, like the elephants of course. I’ve got a little bit of everything, some birds, some chimps, gorillas, so I did travel pretty extensively.

Do you have a favourite subject?

I do. It’s an easy question now because doing my book I’ve had to go through all my work of the last ten years, work it all out, and the lion is my favourite subject. I love lions. But I love the way I feel around elephants, but they’re not my favourite to photograph because they’re so difficult. They’re just big, grey sort of blobs, you know.

Below: Rhinos on the Run

Poaching of rhinos is rife in southern Africa with extinction looming by 2025 if current trends continue. “Panning with my two dinosaur-like subjects as they moved hastily through the bush one behind the other, I wanted to allude to the notion that rhinos as a species are currently on the run,” says Greg. “This image has taken on a more optimistic meaning for me. I long for them to run deep into the wilderness and to hide from the poachers, to become like ghosts roaming undetected”



Zebra in the Dust

Greg photographed these shy and wary zebra from a hide just a few metres from a waterhole on the floor of Kenya’s Rift Valley. Extreme heat and tsetse flies tested his resolve. “Ultimately, one brave zebra stuck his head through the dust for a sip of water.”

Nikon F100 with Nikkor 80-400mm f/5.6 zoom lens, Fuji Provia 100F pushed 1 stop, 1/250sec at f/5.6

Are they the hardest subject to photograph?

Yeah, I’d probably say so. It’s a toss up between them and the rhino, but for the same reason. They’re just big and hard to make look dynamic, which is strange because when you’re around them you feel like they’re incredibly dynamic creatures. With a lion, or any predator, it’s a lot easier because they’ve just got these piercing eyes, they just look through the camera, so it’s a lot easier to photograph.

Your winning photograph was taken with a wideangle lens, do you find your technique and perspective is changing over the years?

Yeah, but not just with elephants, it’s a general trend. When I first started photographing, my mission was to get as close to my subject as possible, with a zoom lens, fill the frame. I had the necessary skills, having worked as a trails guide in the big game territory to do that, but as the years went by I’ve found I’ve been zooming out more and more, trying to capture not just the animal but the environment too and this shot was exactly that. I was in a hide, I had my telephoto lens, but I put it down for a wideangle shot because I realized the only way I was going to capture this scene was with a wideangle lens.

It’s been a great year for you

Yes, it’s been a great year for me and I’ve enjoyed it, but I’m nervous because now, how do I top this year? What next? I feel like I have summited a mountain.

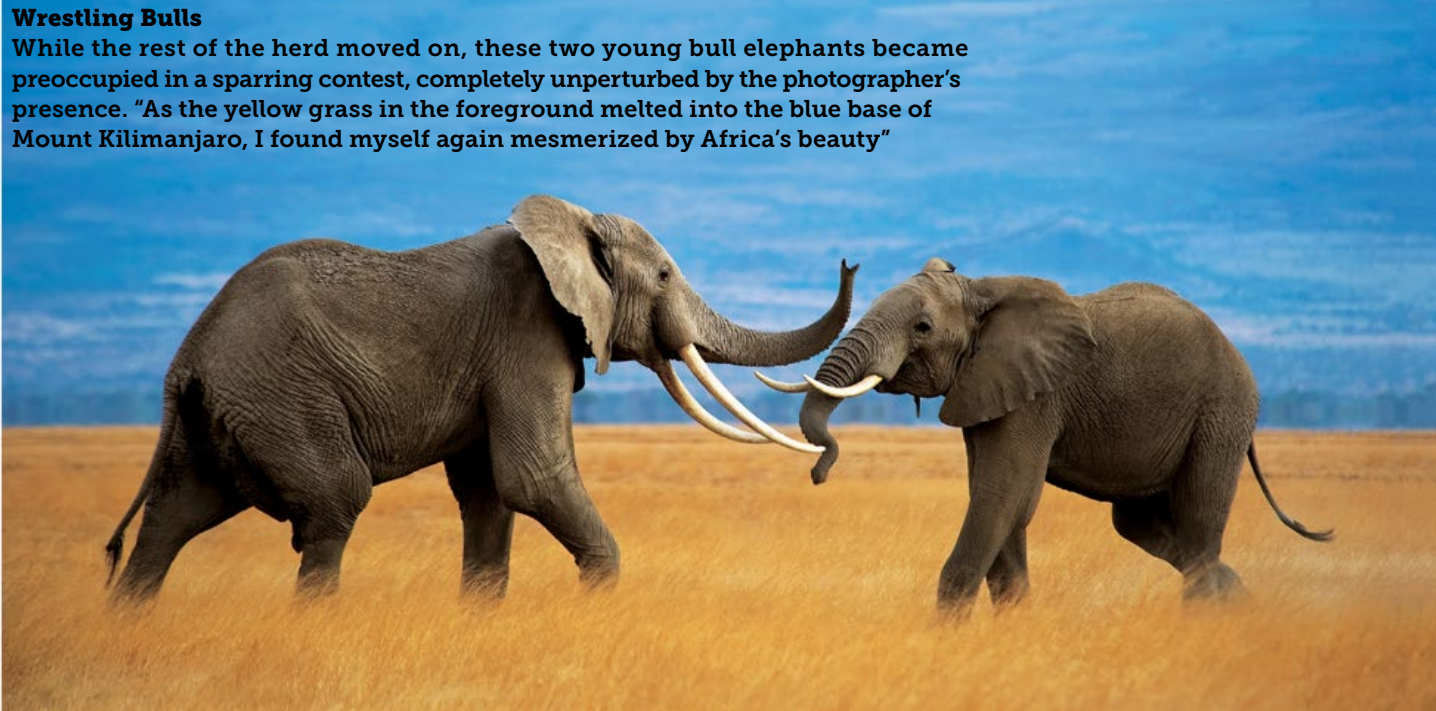


The Role of a Wildlife Photographer

“ The conservation value of a wildlife photograph might at first glance be subtle, but remember it is human nature to protect that which we love and appreciate. It is in our DNA, we do not need to be taught this. Every time a special wildlife photo is shared, an appreciation and love for wildlife increases. Eventually it will grow to a point where people will simply refuse to let these animals disappear ”

Greg du Toit

Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2013



And you're still so young

I know, that's the thing, because I've said to my wife if I died, god forbid, I've lived a full life already. I've seen stuff, I've experienced stuff, I feel totally fulfilled.

What's your inspiration? Are there other photographers you look up to and admire?

Funnily enough, not so much photographers. Of course, there are photographers I do admire, but I have had two mentors and I actually mention them in the introduction to my book. One of the biggest mentors to me was a conservationist called Ian Player. There was a time in South Africa when we only had 400 rhinos left, and he was the guy that led a team and they started Operation Rhino and they built those numbers back up to a global population of 16,000. When I was 16, I heard him talk, and I didn't quite understand exactly what he had achieved as a conservationist, but when he spoke about the life he had lived, a life that was full of danger and

adventure, that made me decide that's what I wanted to do, so he was a huge inspiration for me to go into the bush, a hero really. He wrote the foreword to my book.

What project are you going to be working on next?

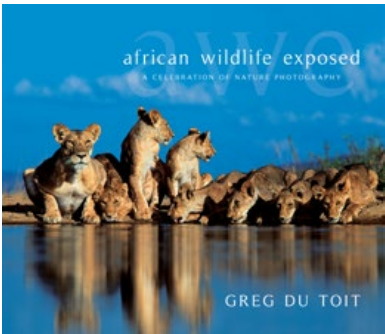
Well, what I'm doing next is something slightly different. I've just produced a coffee table book showing all the wildlife photographs I've been able to take. That's been a journey to get those photographs, so I want to write a book that's going to be a fun, behind the lens kind of book, with all my bush stories and tales, the people I've met. Of course, we will weave the photographic story into that, but now that I've won this competition, I think that book now has the perfect end. I'll get writing in January, I'm pretty excited to do that. I've just got to find a publisher and sort all that out.

That shouldn't be difficult now.

I hope not! ☺

Greg's first book, *AWE: African Wildlife Exposed* has just been published by HPH Publishing. This 160-page hardback features the best of his work from 10 years of wildlife photography across the continent from Ethiopia to South Africa. It is available from all leading book chains as well as Amazon. SRP £40

- The Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2013 exhibition is currently showing at the Natural History Museum, London, until 23 March, 2014. Within the UK the exhibition will tour to more than ten venues. The exhibition's world tour will visit Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Poland, South Africa, The Netherlands and the USA. *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* is co-owned by the Natural History Museum and BBC Worldwide



Ad