

Jonathan & Angela Scott

Jonathan and **Angela Scott** are the only couple to have won Wildlife Photographer of the Year as individuals. As Jonathan celebrates 40 years in Africa, they share their views on image manipulation, the changing role of the wildlife photographer and their opinion of each other's work...

Exclusive interview by Keith Wilson

JONATHAN & ANGELA SCOTT

The Big Cat People

A male lion licks its face at a buffalo kill
Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 800mm f/5.6L,
ISO 1600, 1/125sec at f/5.6

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How long have you and Jonathan been photographing together now?

Angela Scott: It must be more than 20 years.

What is it you enjoy most about working together as a couple?

AS: It's just very stimulating. You have your best friend with you and we're very different, and by being very different you're just constantly stimulating the other person to see things differently. Jonathan has a very big, expansive view of photography – of animals in their environment. He's a naturalist and zoologist, so has a real understanding of the wildlife and its behavior – understanding your subject is one of the key things about being a wildlife photographer. To be with someone like Jonathan means I can just be behind the camera and concentrate on getting the shot. I know he will get me in the best position.

So it's about anticipation?

Jonathan Scott: Exactly. Let's face it, with wildlife photography and sports photography, capturing the moment is actually about knowing what's going to happen next and getting into the best position ahead of everyone else.

AS: And then putting your own interpretation on it. The behavior is the first thing but how do you take a photograph that's different from anybody else's? It's your interpretation – your eye and technical ability that makes it interesting and different, that makes people say 'that's extraordinary'. That's the little piece of magic, that sprinkling of stardust you have to find a way of adding.

Jonathan, what have you learnt from working with Angie?

JS: To be quieter! Angie's a great listener, whereas I'm a real chatterbox. The one thing that really focuses me and makes me more in the moment and quieter is being around Angie. There is a great calmness about the way she operates. But I think the main thing I learned from Angie was to be more adventurous in my approach to photography. Angie encouraged me to use my imagination, to try to see beyond the obvious. Before, I was just happy

being in this amazing place, the Masai Mara, with all these animals and the photography was just like an afterthought. Initially, I used photography as a reference for my drawings. More than anything for me it was about being among the animals, studying their behavior, not photographing them. But by working with Angie I was able to 'see the light', literally, because she wasn't content with just going out there to point the camera at the subject and just press the shutter button. She was always thinking beyond what I was seeing. I wasn't good at that kind of visualisation, I tended to see in a very realistic way. Angie was more artistic in her approach and loved backlight and sidelight – creating mood.

So you're the realist and Angie is the impressionist?

JS: Yes, absolutely, and you know that's across the board. In terms of emotionally, having been brought up on a farm, then studying zoology, I really bought into the whole thing of well, you're born, you live, you die. I didn't think of anything beyond that. I was having a wonderfully interesting life following my passion and being with wildlife, but I didn't really take it beyond the obvious, I wasn't thinking about the big questions. Angie opened the door to a more spiritual way of being, which I was more receptive to by the time we met, and to exploring new ideas and new ways of 'being a photographer'. She encouraged me to think about the images I wanted to take – to think ahead and create images in my imagination. For instance, we might be driving past a beautiful old fallen tree in the Mara and Angie would say, 'Imagine a leopard lying along that branch. How would you compose the shot? What lens would you use?' I began to think ahead, to plan my shots – to be more creative.

Have you ever competed with each other?

JS: No, I think our strengths complement each other; that's why we're such a good partnership. I can absolutely say from the bottom of my heart that I am just as excited about the pictures Angie takes in any situation as I am about the ones I take. Of course, I'm pleased when I get it right, but when I look at Angie's pictures I think of them as our pictures.

“We're very different, and by being very different you're just constantly stimulating the other person to see things differently”

– Angela Scott

Khali the lioness protecting her cub from an invading nomadic male in the Masai Mara

© Jonathan & Angela Scott



JONATHAN & ANGELA SCOTT
— The Big Cat People —



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The Big Cat People

A female cheetah and her two cubs cross the Mara River
in the dry season when the water is at its lowest

Canon EOS-1Ds Mk III, EF 70-200mm f/4L zoom
at 200mm, ISO 200, 1/100sec at f/4

© Jonathan & Angela Scott

AS: That is why we always sell our work as Jonathan and Angela Scott – they are so often a joint effort.

JS: We push our brand as Jonathan and Angela Scott: The Big Cat People – big cats have been a big part of our life. The Masai Mara is our second home, we were married there overlooking the Marsh Pride’s territory 22 years ago. We are a true partnership and I say that for no other reason than it has been a huge benefit to have Angie in my life, not just photographically and for her drive and dedication in making new projects happen, but emotionally. She simply refuses to let us sit back and smell the roses.

“The planet is suffering and wildlife is disappearing at a frightening pace – people need to know and see that”

– Jonathan Scott

Is there ever a time where either of you would rather be working alone?

AS: No never.

JS: Angie would rather I shut up once in a while! The benefit of us working together, and it is an irony because photography is such a personal thing on every level – you can only have one eye behind the viewfinder – is because it is a collaborative effort. We’ll be talking the whole time and we’re both very generous with each other in the best kind of way. She’ll look and say, ‘Over there’, and she’ll know that I’m in a better position to run up the stairs with the wideangle lens for an aerial view. Or I will see a shot that I know she will add a bit of magic to it.

AS: We know each other’s styles so well. They’re quite different, our strengths are quite different. I remember one time in Bhutan we were in this monastery and I could see all these baby monks lining up and I knew that if someone got high up on the steps overlooking the lines of red robed monks there was a wonderful picture there. Jonathan is a master at seeing lines and shapes and patterns – he is very precise and neat with his compositions; that shot was one for him to take. That is teamwork at its best.

JS: Though sometimes things work out differently. Like the shot that Angie took to win the overall award in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition in 2002. Angie had already realized the previous evening that there was a great shot of elephants coming to drink at the Luangwa River in Zambia. The following day we returned to the same spot and Angie quietly and carefully set up her position with her tripod and 500mm lens. Meanwhile, I was desperately trying to tell her how



A female leopard emerges early in the morning from the cave where she has hidden her two cubs

© Jonathan & Angela Scott

to take the photograph because I was sure it was going to be a wonderful low angle shot from water level; seen from low down the elephants would look bigger and more dynamic. But Angie was having none of it and she was right. The low angle shot would have meant that the bank of the river and the sky would have created a messy background – I know because that was the shot I took! Meanwhile, Angie captured this serene painterly image that kept the water as the backdrop to the elephants. It’s so clean, like someone had spread this purplish mauve backcloth behind the elephants – she used her polarizer

to make the colors even more intense. It’s as much a painting as a photograph. Every element is perfect – the elephants, the grey heron, the colors.

It is a beautiful photograph, but the appearance of the heron, was that just serendipitous as you already had it framed?

AS: There was this one elephant family that stopped to drink and I saw this grey heron flying in from upstream. I thought it’s going to be attracted by all the ripples in the water and the possibility of finding fish to feed on. I knew

this was it - the extra element you are always hoping for to add energy to the shot – a special point of interest. So I focused on the heron as it flew into frame. It was all very Zen – you’re just in the moment with your subject – completely present.

The spacing was just perfect

JS: It was one of those ‘decisive moments’ Cartier-Bresson spoke of. Angie took a series of shots as the heron walked in front of the elephants. But when it hit that gap between them she knew that was the shot.



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The Big Cat People

Angela's image of elephants watching a grey heron in Zambia's Luangwa River resulted in her being named Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 2002

© Jonathan & Angela Scott



A female cheetah chasing and impala fawn which she subsequently killed. She blasted past the clump of grass with her eyes closed! The choice here was which to focus on - the cheetah or the impala fawn? There was no way with the 500mm that we could get depth of field to get both in focus, unless we pushed the ISO setting up much higher than the ISO 400 that we used. The fact that the cheetah has its eyes closed as it blasts through the clump of grass really makes the shot more interesting

Canon EOS-1DX, EF 500mm f/4L, ISO 400, 1/2000sec at f/6.3

© Jonathan & Angela Scott

When you see the other shots they are nice but second rate by comparison to that killer shot!

AS: It is a very peaceful picture. A lot of wildlife photography, especially in the old days, was very male driven. It was very macho. Everything had to have action and be very big. I always laugh a little when Jonathan sees a big male lion or a big bull elephant with huge tusks – he gets so excited at the sight of these alpha males! I like settling down quietly with my subject and

chipping away, waiting for the perfect moment.

JS: Look at when I won Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 1987. My shot was a wildebeest being grabbed by the nose by a wild dog. It epitomised the age-old struggle between predator and prey, that final moment between life and death. I remember some criticism coming in at the time about that shot and of another winning shot by another photographer of lions killing a buffalo: ‘What are these photographer’s doing? All this

emphasis on gore, it’s almost pornographic’. I said, ‘Hang on a minute, we’re not trying to glamorise violence.’ I was caught up in a moment of great intensity. I wasn’t wishing that anything was going to get killed; this for me was the natural end for one animal providing life for another. From the wild dogs point of view this was it: the pack now had food for their puppies. In terms of the reality I was depicting, I certainly wasn’t taking the shot because I wanted to glorify violence. Though

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– Angela Scott

on reflection I do think there was a lot more emphasis in wildlife photography in those days of getting action shots and focusing on predators. I was certainly always fascinated by large charismatic animals and by the big cats in particular but you need to cover it all – see the big picture and the detail.

AS: I think there’s a place for both in wildlife photography and I am so happy that more women are now involved because we do have a slightly different eye. I’d rather have my elephant photograph on the wall (it is pride of place in Jonathan’s study), the image holds a good energy and it makes you feel more peaceful just looking at it. I like to try to tap into the emotional life of my subjects – the sense of connection I feel between them and us in terms of the connectivity of all life – the web of life.

JS: I think we have been incredibly fortunate to be wildlife photographers in the generation that we were; the heyday of the stock image libraries in the 1980s and 90s when you could make a proper living, when wildlife books were commercially viable. It’s extremely difficult to get published these days. Now the agencies can source an image from anybody anywhere and often very cheaply too. It was, I think, Niall Benvie, who said, ‘Today we have to define ourselves if we want to be professionals by finding our own projects to differentiate our work, and to have a message that hopefully one can tie to conservation, something that makes a statement.’ The planet is suffering and wildlife is disappearing at a frightening pace – people need to know and see that.

There are a handful of photographers doing that, such as our fellow Canon ambassadors Mike ‘Nick’ Nichols and Brent Stirton, plus you have the International League of Conservation Photographers trying to raise awareness of important environmental issues. Look at James Balog and his inspiring work on the retreat of the glaciers and global warming. He is using imagery in the way that Al Gore used words – very powerful stuff.

AS: Ultimately though it shouldn’t be about the photographer, but about the subject.

A young tigress slips into the water while hunting
chital deer at Bandhavgarh National Park, India

Canon EOS-1D Mk III, EF 800mm f/5.6L,
ISO 640, 1/200sec at f/5.6

© Jonathan & Angela Scott

A young tigress is captured in a dynamic pose, slipping into a body of water. She is positioned horizontally across the frame, with her body angled towards the right. Her front legs are extended forward, and her hind legs are pushing off the ground. The water is shallow, and the tigress's reflection is clearly visible in the calm surface below her. The background consists of tall, dry grass and some green foliage, suggesting a natural habitat. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the tigress's fur and the stripes on its body.

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it’s incredible – probably the
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– Jonathan Scott

Wildlife photography is definitely redefining itself now because of all the imagery that is out there.

JS: It will be interesting to see which direction the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition takes. It has evolved enormously since its inception 50 years ago in 1964 from a strong emphasis on action and the dramatic to embrace more evocative and emotional imagery. There is a greater emphasis on aesthetics across all categories now. I think that just about every wildlife photographer aspires to winning the competition at some point in their career – you only have to look at the list of winners to see that. It has certainly been of huge benefit in raising public awareness about the natural world and the art of photography. And for any photographer lucky enough to win a prize in the competition it is a life-changing experience. That is particularly wonderful for young people who dream of carving out a niche in this business – or making it a rewarding hobby – the competition gives them something to measure themselves against. There’s a 50th anniversary book coming out soon and an online site, which will highlight the transitions the competition has gone through – and perhaps where it’s headed. We always wonder why the UK doesn’t have its own Association of Wildlife Photographers to help encourage youngsters and good practice?

AS: Our old concept of photography has become blurred by the innovations digital photography has made possible. I try to record what I see without changing the truth of what I saw later. I like the National Geographic ethos of keeping it real. But I also appreciate the artistry of what some people are creating with their computers – it’s different and exciting. Look what Nick Brandt has achieved with his black and white images. Perhaps it would be helpful if we recognized different genres that now exist in photography since the digital age came into being – just for clarity’s sake. In my heart what I love most is the work of someone like Vincent Munier who immerses himself in his environment – is at one with his subject. There is a purity about his images that connects me to the wilderness I so love – it’s real and tangible.

JS: I have nothing against people letting their imagination run wild and being creative with their



A male lion shakes the rain from his mane after a heavy storm in the Masai Mara. The only way to get this effect was to shoot with a slow shutter speed. Fortunately it rained and rained and rained, and the lion did this a few times so we could choose a number of different settings to get the shot we wanted. You need just the right amount of blur and sharpness to make it work
Canon EOS-1DX, EF 500mm f/4L + 1.4x converter, ISO 1000, 1/60sec at f/6.3

© Jonathan & Angela Scott

computer – just be honest about it. Let's not pretend this is what you saw when you took the picture if it wasn't. Honesty has to be the bottom line. If you want to add another thousand wildebeest to your image of a river crossing then tell us about it. It is already hard at times to recognize what is real and what is not – people are often left questioning the way an image was taken in today's world of digital wizardry. When we speak of the 'natural' world that says something about the reality of nature – we don't need to embellish it. That is why the people at National Geographic are so insistent that they see the Raw files, to check that there has not been any significant manipulation – just as the Wildlife Photographer of

the Year competition always did in the past. They are saying we want to present the world as it is. Otherwise it all becomes theatre. Will we create an unreal world that perhaps disconnects us from the real world? I have nothing against change or seeing things differently per se but just want clarity in what we are doing and why.

If you go back to the time of film and transparencies the onus was on the photographer to get everything right in camera.

AS: My advice to any young photographer is to learn everything you can about your camera, make it a part

of you, learn about exposure and light – don't rely on your computer to fix things afterwards. And choose great lenses!

Will we see a return of Big Cat Diary?

JS: We get asked that all the time and it's still out there because of iPlayer and YouTube and NetFlicks. I think they've got 200 clips of *Big Cat Diary* on YouTube and the great thing about it is that it ages very well. I look a lot younger of course! But the stories still hold true: the show's strength was always the amazing animal characters that our audience were able to empathise with, such as Half-Tail the leopard and Kike the cheetah.

An African wild dog bites into the snout of a wildebeest – Jonathan was named Wildlife Photographer of the Year 1987 for this image
© Jonathan & Angela Scott



“My advice to any young photographer is to learn about exposure and light – don’t rely on your computer to fix things afterwards”

– Angela Scott

experience as a wildlife destination. Based on wildlife alone you’re not going to compete with the variety of species you see on a safari in Africa. I always say that if I had only one day left in my life I would spend it with Angie in the Mara – there is nowhere like it. You’ve got all three big cats, all very visible. In India the wildlife areas are a lot smaller and it’s often a bun fight when it comes to finding and watching a tiger. It’s all too easy for it to become just about seeing the tiger, with crowds of vehicles racing around in clouds of dust. Often your sighting will be of a single tiger, maybe walking, maybe lying. When you do see a tiger though, it’s incredible – probably the most majestic of all the big cats, along with a male lion. Angie got a wonderful picture in Bandhavgarh National Park a few years ago with her 800mm lens right at the end of the day as a young female tiger stalked in to a lake with its reflection in the water. It’s a cracking photo. It was literally at the moment when the driver was pointing at his watch and saying, we’ve got to go, we’ve got to go!

When you met Angie, was she already a photographer?

JS: Yes she was. I remember going into her study and looking on her wall and thinking ‘Wow!’ Angie writes diaries and collects leaves and bird feathers and loves to make records of her trips and life experiences. She has scrapbooks of images taken with her friends as a teenager, lots of black and white pictures of them growing up in Tanzania and Kenya. I remember looking at those and thinking, “These are bloody good, these are different, these are artistic – why aren’t I taking shots like this?”

You’re not the only husband and wife wildlife photographers, but who are the others that you admire?

JS: Well, there’s the Jouberts. Beverley is a great stills photographer and Dereck is a top cameraman and filmmaker here in Africa. Also our friends Victoria Stone and Mark Deeble from the UK take stills and make wonderful wildlife programs. They have done

Animal Planet and BBC Knowledge still repeat the old shows and they are available on DVD.

To answer your question, I think the BBC felt that after 12 years the show had run its course – from its start as *Big Cat Diary* with a show on air every week for six or eight weeks it morphed into a major TV Event with *Big Cat Week*, transmitting a program every night for a week with a much more intimate feel in the way the show was presented. Finally, in 2008 we had *Big Cat Live*. The BBC could still do it and I am sure it

would be popular, but there’s only so much money and there will always be pressure to create new shows. The beauty for Angie and myself is that we get to live the Big Cat experience any time we visit the Mara where we have a stone cottage at Governor’s Camp. It is our second home.

You have been to India. Photographing tigers?

JS: Yes, photographing tigers is much more difficult to getting a strong photo story on lions. Tigers are more

solitary and remain hidden a lot of the time, unlike lions which live in groups and are so much more visible out on the plains. Tigers are more secretive, more like leopards. They are denizens of the forest edges and tall grass meadows. Unless a tiger has cubs it’s tough to get really interesting material.

How do India and the Mara compare as photographic experiences?

JS: To be fair, we think of India as much a cultural



some great work out here – everything from the life cycle of a fig tree to dramatic stuff with hippos and crocodiles. Let's face it, photography is by its very nature about the individual – their point of view. It doesn't generally lend itself to partnerships or not often partnerships of equals. There is always the perfect position to take the image from – so you have to really believe in each other to give that up. Photographers are often 'loners' at heart. Usually somebody is going to be left behind when there are two of you. In our case I like to drive and get Angie into the best position; I trust her implicitly. Angie once said that loving somebody or having a great relationship is defined by creating a 'Competition of Generosity', both thinking about what is best for the other person. As a philosophy it sounds rather grand, but if you can live by it, boy does it work in life and in work.



Jonathan and Angela Scott are among the world's most acclaimed wildlife photographers. They divide their time between their home on the outskirts of Nairobi and at Governor's Camp in the Masai Mara, the inspiration for most of their award-winning photography, books and TV series. The Scotts are Canon Ambassadors and members of the SanDisk Elite Team. They are supporters of many conservation groups, including the Cheetah Conservation Fund, East African Wildlife Society, Leopard Guardians, Rhino Ark, Galapagos Conservation Trust and the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.
<http://www.jonathanangelascott.com>

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