



# Jasper Doest

Best known for his fantastical image of a snow monkey seemingly flying on a magic carpet in the middle of a snowstorm, **Jasper Doest** is one of Europe's most admired wildlife photographers. He tells *Wild Planet* why he believes emotional engagement is the most important element of his images

*Interview by Keith Wilson*

**This unusual photo of an Arctic tern flying just over Jasper's head is typical of the imaginative compositions that typify much of his photography**  
*Nikon D3, Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8 zoom at 70mm,  
ISO 400, 1/1000sec at f/8*

Interview

**Which interest came first, nature or photography?**  
My parents always taught me about the natural world and that must have been the basis of my nature photography career. My dad had a SLR camera, which fascinated me, and I was always running around with my mum’s Kodak Instamatic. However, as I grew up, I got other interests and it wasn’t until my twentieth birthday that I was caught by the photography bug. At that point nature was a great subject to improve my skills, as nature is everywhere and accessible for each and every one of us. While photographing, I rediscovered the beauty of it and soon I was hooked.

**When you were growing up in Holland, which animals interested you most?**  
Growing up in an area where we had the coastal zone on one hand and open meadows on the other, it wasn’t really a surprise that I showed great interest in birds. But I also had a keen eye for little insects and aquatic species.

**What made you decide to become a wildlife photographer?**  
Soon after buying my first SLR camera I loved nature photography. Love grew into passion and with passion came the dream about doing something more with

my photography. That remained a dream for a long time. I decided to study biology, so that I could spend more time in the field and learn about the subjects that I was photographing. That decision brought me all the way to Svalbard, where I was doing fieldwork for my Master of Science degree. I entered one of the Svalbard-photographs into a well-known Dutch photo competition, where there was a amateur and professional category. Being a total amateur I decided to take the risk and enter within the professional category and to my big surprise I was awarded overall winner of the competition. And I took it from there.

**Where is your favourite location to photograph wildlife?**  
That is a very difficult question as I don’t believe in such. I think that if you want to do well as a photographer, you’ll need to spend enough time with your subject to fall in love with each and every one of them. As long as I’m able to work with my subject, being submerged in their environment, rather than looking from the sideline, I’m happy.

**What makes snow monkeys so special?**  
The place where these Japanese macaques are located, in these thermal hot springs with rocks and steam, makes it very attractive from a visual perspective. Besides that, all primates have very strong facial expressions, which I love working with.

**They have brought you a lot of recognition and success, are you worried that they might become more difficult to work with in future? ;-)**  
Most people who visit Japan for photography want to visit all hotspots during their visit. So they visit the famous cranes, swans, eagles and since the macaques are relatively close to Tokyo, they also visit the macaques for one or two days. While doing that, you’re never able to make the most of every single location. You only get a glimpse of what is possible before you need to move on. That’s why I chose one subject and tried to work with it. I spend over 30 days with them in total and I’m far from being finished.

**“I remember the tears running down my cheeks when I saw him there, standing majestic on the hillside”**

**How does it feel seeing your snow monkey picture being used as the main image to publicise Wildlife Photographer of the Year?**  
Humble. Through my photography I want to do nature justice and reach out to as many people as possible, telling about the beauty and fragility of the natural world. Wildlife Photographer of the Year is one of the largest wildlife events on the planet and has an incredible outreach worldwide. To be able to use this stage is a great privilege.

**Which other species do you most enjoy photographing?**  
I’ve enjoyed every single one of them, from the Arctic foxes on Svalbard to the tarantulas in Texas. I’m always trying to give my photographs a sense of place or emotion and while doing that it is impossible not to fall in love with my subject.




A male polar bear on a snow covered hillside in Svalbard, one of the world’s northernmost landmasses. Jasper stayed with this bear until it fell asleep  
Nikon D300s, Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8 zoom at 70mm, ISO 200, 1/100sec at f/22





Jasper's magical image of a Japanese macaque, more commonly known as a snow monkey, won the Visions of Nature Category in the 2013 Wildlife Photographer of the Year awards  
*Nikon D4, Nikkor 55mm f/2.8, ISO 1600, 1/100sec at f/11*





The facial expressions of snow monkeys convey a wide variety of emotions, including this study of contemplative human-like calm

Nikon D3, Nikkor 105mm, ISO 2000, 1/200sec at f/16

***Do you have a favourite lens for wildlife photography?***

To me, photographic equipment is a tool to help you in the process of translating emotions and experiences to a two dimensional frame called a photograph. First of all, I try to figure out what the place is about, what the subject is about and which ingredients I need in order to do the moment justice. After that I gather the right tools and try to work through the moment. So, do I have a favourite lens? I guess not...it depends on the moment. The lens that helps me capturing what I'm after is my favourite. Note, that I often don't use very long lenses such as a 500mm, 600mm or 800mm. In terms of lenses, I generally carry a 16-35mm, 24-70mm, 100mm macro, 70-200mm, 400mm and extenders. If I need any other tools for the job I make sure I'll get the right tools.

***Which has been the hardest subject to photograph?***

I don't think in terms of hardest subject and don't really enjoy telling heroic stories about how difficult it was getting a certain photograph, as it is not about me. It's about the subject, about the animal and it's surroundings, about the landscape and about the story I want to tell through these photographs. Yes, I have photographed at -30°C and yes I have worked on horrible places like hot and steamy landfill sites in southern Europe. But while on the job, I'm so focused on what I'm after that I really enjoy the whole process, even when it doesn't work out the way I want it to be. It means I'll need to try harder and stay on the job. As long as you place yourself within an animal's territory, eventually something is going to happen. You do not know what and you can only anticipate, asking yourself the question what the moment is about when it happens.

***Where do you derive your photographic inspiration?***

I once read that photography is a reflection of your personal life, and that if life were to be about photography, what would the photographs be about? That said, I get my inspiration from many things that aren't related to photography. I get inspired by the way my little daughter explores the world on a daily basis, I get inspired by other art forms, things I see in the cities, talking to dedicated people from different fields (musicians, athletes, etc). And, of course, I get inspiration by looking at other photographers and looking at my own work. Analyzing all these things in general, the likes and dislikes, creates a certain path that you can follow, and I guess that's creating my path of life, inspired by everything that turns up on it.

***“The place where these Japanese macaques are located, in these thermal hot springs with rocks and steam, makes it very attractive from a visual perspective”***





Another ongoing project of Jasper's is the gannet colonies of Britain and Ireland. These crowded, rocky outcrops provide endless opportunities for dramatic flash lighting with slow shutter speeds  
*Nikon D3, Nikkor 200-400mm f/4 zoom at 100mm, ISO 400, 1/40sec at f/11, flash*



Interview

**What camera, lenses and other accessories make up your essential wildlife photography kit?**

For my style of photography I need a robust camera, that can handle harsh environments. Besides that, I want my camera to have a fast and accurate autofocus, and shoot with high enough frames per second in order to get the moment when it's there. The Canon EOS-1DX does that for me. It is essential that you become one with your equipment, knowing it in and out. Lenses need to be sturdy too. I like shooting with the f/2.8 series as it allows you to play with shallow depth of field. Accessory-wise, I'd say that an angle-finder is essential to avoid back and neck problems, a remote trigger, a flash and pocket-wizards, and a decent tripod should be on every wildlife photographer's gear list. Also a set of ND grads and ND filters comes in very useful.

**Do you shoot video as well? If so, what is the best thing about video compared to stills?**

I hardly every do. Perhaps I should as videos are a great tool to engage people with your work and the subject.

**What is it about your style and approach to photography that makes your work stand out from other wildlife imagery?**

Perhaps I'm not the right person to answer this question. But I'll give it a try. I see a lot of great photographs passing by these days, which are perfect registrations of a perfect moment, but they don't show any emotion and hardly leave anything to the viewer's imagination. I think that the quality of my work lies there; although I studied biology, it is not the biology that drives me, it is my own feeling for the subject, but with biological knowledge in the back of my mind.

Photography is more than the perfect registration, it is not perfection that moves the heart, it is the emotion. And if you think of the work of the most successful photographers out there – Frans Lanting, Jim Brandenburg, Paul Nicklen, Vincent Munier – it is the emotion within their photographs that makes your heart beat faster.

**How does your photography make a difference to preserving wildlife?**

I think it starts with reaching out to people and creating a sense of appreciation for wildlife by watching my work. Also, through the stories I produce I try to show nature's fragile side, trying to reach out to my audience and telling them nature is something we shouldn't take for granted. I'm fairly new to this all, and have just been accepted as a fellow of the international League of Conservation Photographers, a group

of some of the world's best conservation photographers, using their work to make a difference. And I hope to learn a lot throughout the process of being part of this dedicated group. There is a lot more to do through photography as I've just seen during our annual meeting in Washington. Photography is such a powerful tool, giving words to the ones that cannot speak, reaching out to local governments and creating a change from the inside out, that I really want to make use of these qualities that photography has to offer.

**Can you recall for me your most memorable moment as a wildlife photographer?**

It was when I was photographing in the east of Svalbard with two close friends. We hadn't seen a polar bear and while driving my snowmobile I prayed for opportunities to see and photograph these bears in this magnificent habitat. Five minutes later we ran into a male polar bear that had just feasted on seal pups. I remember the tears running down my cheeks when I saw him there, standing majestic on the hillside. We spent five hours with the bear in the middle of nowhere, while the bear fell asleep right in front of us and that's how we left him.

*“If you think of the work of the most successful photographers out there, it is the emotion within their photographs that makes your heart beat faster”*

**And the most embarrassing?**

There's many embarrassing moments to tell. Ha! And again, I'm not sure if I'd be the right person to ask. Perhaps it would be better to ask some of my friends. While being in the field I'm so focused at what I'm doing that I often leave a path of equipment behind me while changing my setup, and that way I lose a lot of stuff. I also take stupid risks when it comes to equipment, knowing it is not going to work, but still trying it nonetheless. So I guess that most of my embarrassing moments are equipment related. I remember photographing deer in Texas from underneath a car. After the sun set I stepped onto the back of the car and had a drink with one of my friends, after which we went home, driving straight over my tripod, which I left underneath the car. And the list of stories like this is endless. Follow me on Facebook and some stories will pop-up again, I'm sure. This is so typically me, that I'm afraid this will be the story of my life. But I'm not fighting it. If I would pay close attention



**Left:** Every autumn sees Jasper photographing the grey seal colonies of the North Sea when they come ashore to give birth  
*Nikon D4, 15mm f/2.8, ISO 500, 1/160sec at f/11, flash*



In Japan, snow monkeys have become very  
habituated to humans, allowing Jasper to  
approach closely with wideangle lenses  
*Nikon D4, Nikkor 17-35mm f/2.8 zoom at 17mm,  
1/125sec at f/8*







to every little cap I'd have to place back on my lenses while being out in the field, I'd lose my focus and wouldn't be able to succeed. So although it has been expensive, I'd like to see it as a quality being able to work so focused.

**What are your photographic goals and ambitions for the next few years?**

Using my photography to produce conservation stories that would reach out to the right people and initiate change, both on solo stories, as well as working collectively with other talented people.

**Which photographers' work do you most admire?**

Also this list is endless. There are many photographers who have inspired me and helped me throughout my work. Naming only a handful would not be fair to all the ones I'd forget to mention.


A rising young star of wildlife photography, Dutch-born Jasper Doest is already a multiple category winner of Wildlife Photographer of the Year and a fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers. His work appears regularly in *National Geographic*, *BBC Wildlife* and other international magazines.

[www.doest-photography.com](http://www.doest-photography.com)

**Above:** Jasper frequently travels to Svalbard to photograph the wildlife and Arctic foxes are a favourite subject. "For years, the polar bear has been the animal climate change ambassador," he says. "However, it seems the polar bear is losing the battle. The time is right to introduce a second ambassador, one that can assist the polar bear in the battle against global warming, an energetic, cheerful fur-ball, mostly known for its white downy coat: the Arctic fox"

Canon EOS 10D, EF 300mm f/4 + 1.4x converter, ISO 200, 1/1250sec at f/5.6

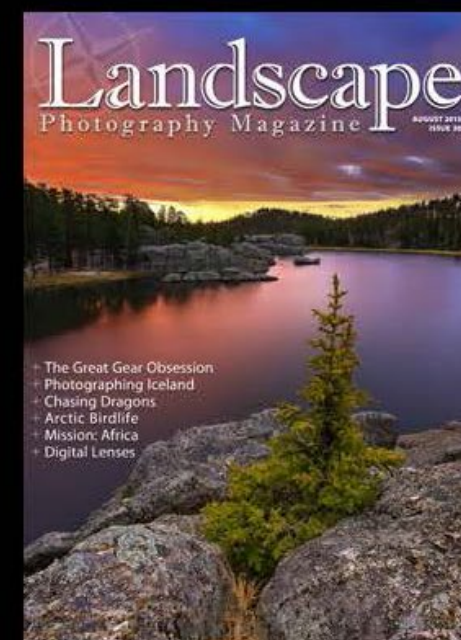
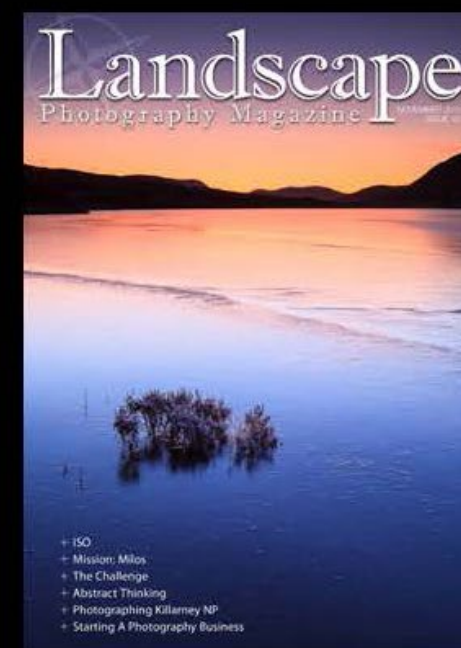
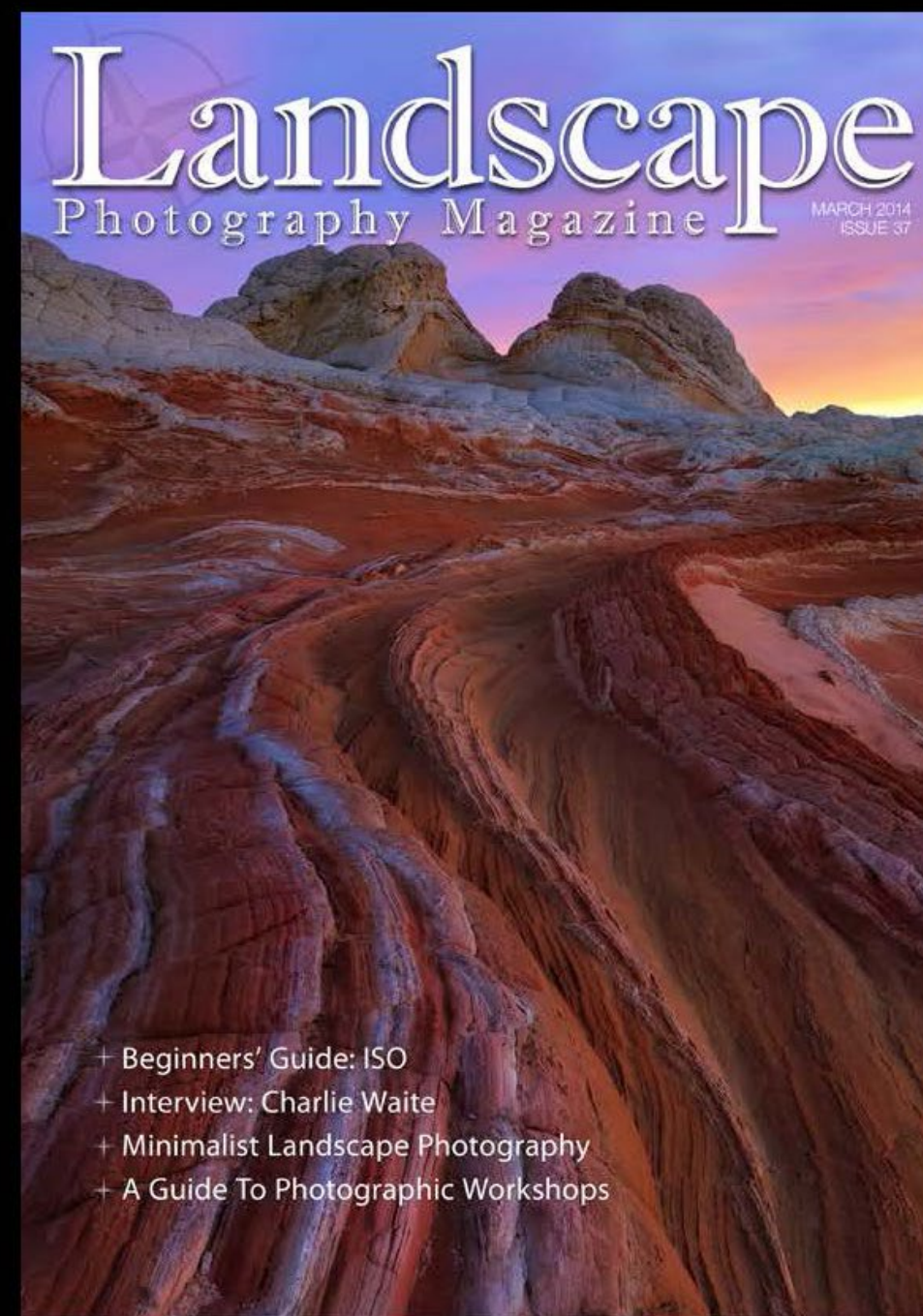
**What is the best piece of advice you can give to someone wanting to become a wildlife photographer?**

Ask yourself of every single subject that comes in front of your lens: "What is it that makes me excited about this subject, this place, this moment?" Then try to capture those answers within your photographs. 



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