

YAWNING HIPPOPOTAMUS
Taken in the Masai Mara,
Kenya. Nikon D3s, Nikon 600mm
f/4, 1/2500 sec, f/5.6, ISO800



CLOSE UP



MARSEL VAN OOSTEN

There's a compositional style to a Marsel van Oosten photo that must stem from his life as an art director. Keith Wilson discovers why the nature pro now has to work hard to achieve simplicity in his images

Photography began as a way for Marsel van Oosten to unwind from the stresses of working as an award-winning creative director. But on holiday, taking pictures of wildlife, he discovered that he could be just as artistic with a camera as he could be at work. One day, he gave up his career in advertising to become a professional nature photographer. He reveals why he's never looked back...

You were a designer before you became a photographer; why the change?

I'd worked in advertising for more than 15 years, as an art director and later as a creative director. Being a creative at an ad agency is a great job, but it's hard work and mentally draining. Photography had always been my outlet for my artistic frustrations.

What photographic subjects interested you when you worked in advertising?

I've always been interested in travel, landscape and wildlife photography.

What sort of standard were you at then?

It started as a hobby and grew totally out of control. I wanted to know how good I was, so I entered photography competitions and won several big ones. That made me think about a career in the industry. One day, there was another frustrating meeting with a client and I decided I'd had enough. I made up my mind to quit and become a nature photographer.

A brave move. How did you feel?

I realised that it would be hard work, and that it would mean a radical change of lifestyle – no more big salaries. I had to start all over again, and chances were that it wouldn't work. It felt funny, too, suddenly calling myself a photographer – it was like I was pretending to be someone I wasn't!



SILHOUETTED MEERKAT A scout looks out of its burrow in Botswana. Nikon D2x, Nikon 200-400mm f/4G, 1/640 sec, f/8, ISO200

What do you like to photograph, aside from wildlife?

I call myself a nature photographer, because I like to photograph the natural world – be it wildlife or landscapes. The other genre I do regularly is travel. I recently spent some time in India on an assignment for *National Geographic Traveler*, shooting a story on tiger safaris.

What was the first big photography project you worked on?

It was a book on African safari lodges, *Wild Romance*, which I did with my wife, Daniëlla. We photographed the landscape,

the wildlife and 46 lodges in six African countries. It was that book that triggered *National Geographic* to offer me a job.

What makes a Marsel van Oosten photograph memorable?

I'm a minimalist – I go to great lengths to eliminate visual clutter and get a single-minded, clear image. My advertising background has had a big influence on my photography style, as has my history in graphic design. Composition is probably my strongest point. Strong, defined shapes, separation between elements and a clear visual hierarchy are critically important for any of my photographs. Although I shoot wildlife and landscapes, I often consider myself to be a wildlife photographer who thinks like a landscape photographer.

What's your favourite image?

My photo of an elephant at Victoria Falls is my most popular shot (see page 95), but it's not the one I'm most proud of – as with most wildlife photography, the luck factor was considerable. I'm most proud of images that are the result of thinking differently – of creating an image rather than capturing it. My star-trail images from Namibia are good examples (page 90), as are my snow monkey images from Japan (page 91).

What's your 'desert island lens', the one you could never do without?

If there's wildlife on the island, it would be my Nikon 200-400mm f/4G. It's not as sharp as my 600mm f/4G but I love the fact that you can use it to include a significant part of the habitat in images. If there's no





wildlife on the island, it would be my Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8 – razor sharp, and perfect for creating dynamic shots.

f/2.8 or f/8?

f/8. With landscapes I don't get sufficient depth of field at f/2.8, and most lenses perform better at f/8 than f/2.8.

What's the weight of your kit bag?

It depends on the sort of trip I'm on. My wildlife bag is usually about 20-22kg, but my landscape bag doesn't have the 200-400mm and 600mm lenses so is considerably lighter!

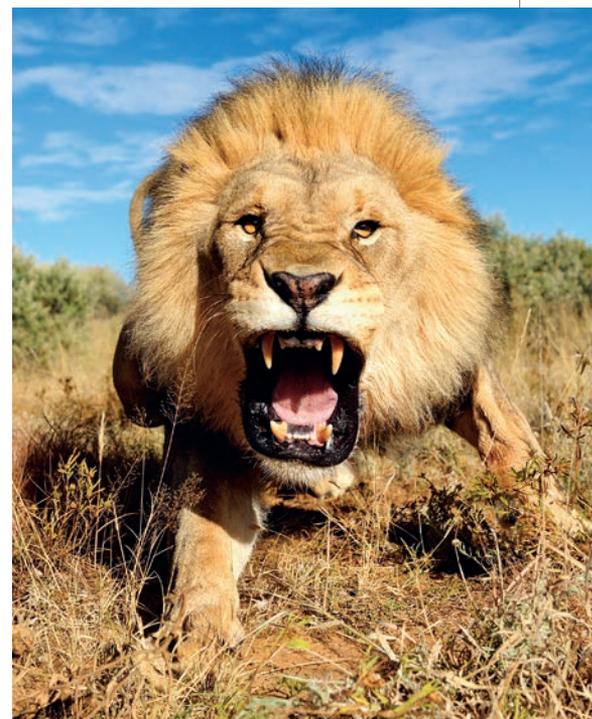
Which Nikon cameras have you owned?

The Nikon F-401 was my first serious SLR. I was still rather clueless about

WATERHOLE A thirsty springbok drinks from a waterhole in the Namib Desert, Namibia. Nikon D2x, Nikon 120-400mm f/4G, 1/350 sec, f/11, ISO250



ELEPHANT AND SEATED COUPLE Up close and personal with an elephant at a safari lodge in Zambia. Nikon D3, Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8 VR II, 1/400 sec, f/16, ISO800



CHARGING LION A wide-angle view in the Kalahari Desert, South Africa, shot with a remote shutter release. Nikon D3, Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8, 1/5000 sec, f/5.6, ISO800



PROFILE

Your at-a-glance guide to Marsel's career, from life in the fast lane to life on the African plains

■ Marsel graduated in art direction and graphic design, and worked on the creative side of advertising for more than 15 years before becoming a wildlife photographer.

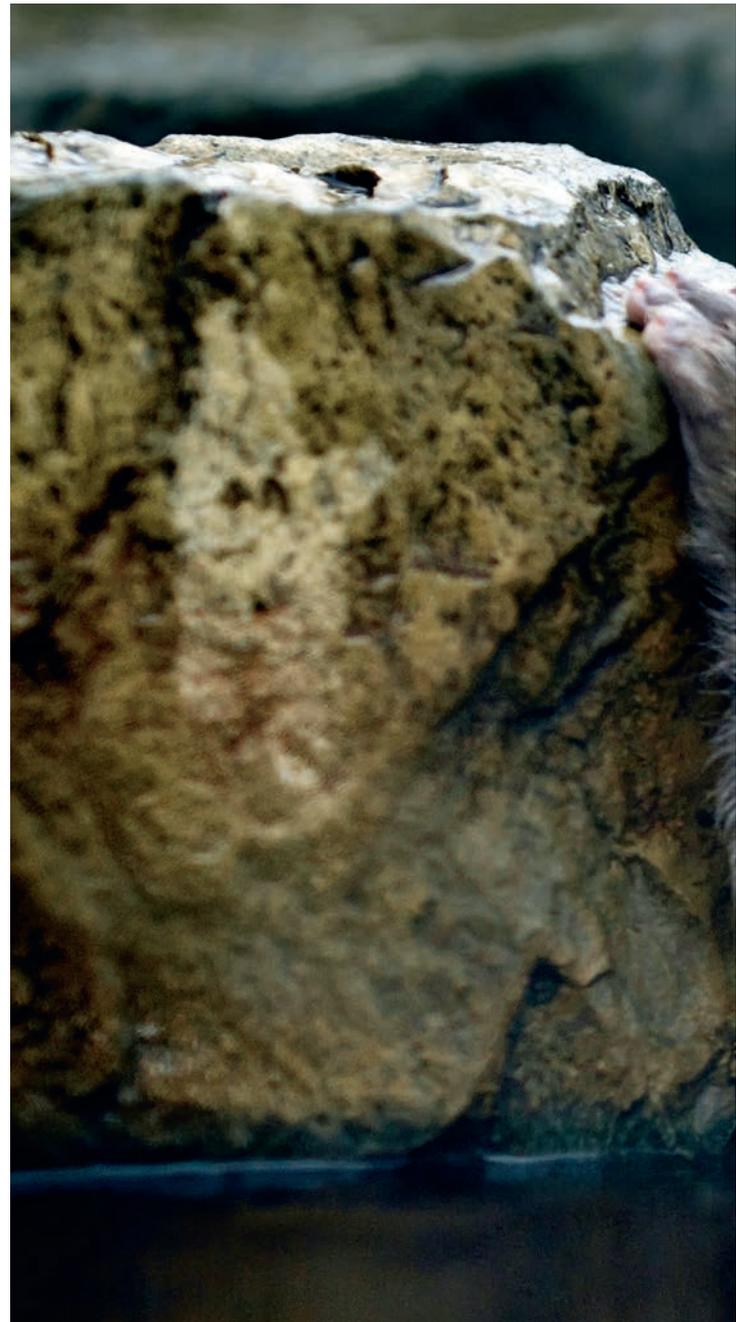
■ He and his wife, Daniëla Sibbing, live in Amsterdam. Together they run Squiver, a dedicated photo tours, image library and fine art print business.

■ Marsel's numerous awards include prizes in the International Photography Awards, Nature's Best International Photography Awards and European Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition.

■ His images have been published worldwide by dozens of magazines, including *National Geographic*, *BBC Wildlife*, *Audubon*, *GEO* and *Science Illustrated*.



ROCK ARCH
Shot in the Arches National Park, Utah. Nikon D3s, Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8, 25 secs, f/4, ISO1600



STAR TRAIL Star trails over the dead trees and giant dunes of Deadvlei, in the Namib Desert, Namibia. Nikon D3, Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8, 30 secs, f/16, ISO100

photography when I got it, but this camera made me feel as though I'd taken the first step towards more than just snapshots.

The F-401 was stolen in New York, so I bought the F-801. I then got the F100 when I started taking shots for work. I made the switch to digital as soon as I could afford a D-SLR, a D70. I never liked the hassle of shooting slides – the costs involved, the lack of direct feedback – so the D70 changed my life. I learned more about photography, got better and started experimenting more. A German publisher made a large-format calendar of my Africa work, and half of it was shot with the D70.

I then got a D2x. More pixels, more speed, more control... It was an obvious choice. I started selling prints, so the megapixel increase was helpful. When I wanted a second body for my African safaris, I bought a D2xs, as this was the latest model at the time. After that it was the D3. High ISO noise has always been a major nuisance, because wildlife photographers often shoot when light levels are low but usually need speed as their subjects are moving. Being able to work with ISO800 and higher without visible noise was a major breakthrough. The camera's ergonomics are unrivalled, too – everything is exactly where it's supposed to be. It's already a legendary camera.

I then wanted more megapixels for landscape work, so the D3x made perfect

sense. I use the camera for wildlife as well, but mostly when there's enough light to work with a low ISO. I don't like the noise patterns of the higher ISO noise of the D3x. I also have the D3s, as the larger buffer is great when I'm photographing continuous wildlife action or birds in flight. The fact that the sensor got even better than the one in the D3 made it a no-brainer.

What don't you like about the camera?

The ridiculous connector for my cable release – only a toddler has fingers tiny enough to tighten that screw! Also, the just-as-tiny S/C/M switch on the front, the lack of a large, Canon-style wheel... I'd also like all the buttons to be a bit bigger so that I could operate them with my gloves on – if you're working at -20°C, you want that.



SNOW MONKEY A snow monkey clings to a rock in Japan. Nikon D2x, Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8G, 1/320 sec, f/2.8, ISO500



SNOW MONKEY WITH ICE BLOCK Getting ready to throw a snowball? Nikon D2x, Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8D, 1/180 sec, f/8, ISO320

“ Shower caps are probably the most unusual things in my kit bag. They’re small and light, but perfect to slip over my camera setup when it starts to rain or snow ”

Marsel van Oosten *Wildlife Photographer*

Which Nikon bodies do you now own?
The D3, D3x and D3s. By the time this interview is published, it will be the D3s, D4 and D800.

What are the most unusual things you pack in your camera bag?
Shower caps. They’re small and light, but perfect to slip over my camera setup when it starts to rain or snow.

When do you use flash?
I mainly use it in my wildlife photography. I don’t like the look of on-camera flash. A few years ago I started experimenting with off-camera flash to photograph snow monkeys in Japan. It’s a species that’s been photographed to death, and I wanted to create something completely

different. The series won me the title of Nature Photographer of the Year at the International Photography Awards.

How many memory cards do you use?
I have two 16Gb 800x Lexar cards in each camera, but could do with less. It’s only on safaris and when photographing birds in flight that I need that amount of gigabytes.

How many gigabytes of pictures do you shoot a week?
That really depends on the subject and conditions. With landscapes, I don’t shoot much – I spend most of the time scouting for locations and finding good angles. When I’m shooting wildlife I shoot much more, and when there’s action involved it can be thousands of images in a single day.

What percentage of shots do you delete?
Again, hard to say. It depends on the mood I was in when shooting or deleting! After a day of photographing birds in flight it might be as much as 95 per cent. After shooting landscapes it’s probably 70 per cent. But it fluctuates like crazy.

How do you stay on top of current trends and your own image workflow?
I’m a member of a couple of online photo communities, and get a few newsletters that keep me up to date with new stuff. As for my image workflow, my main problem is that I’m away too often and don’t have time to process all the images I shoot. We run a lot of photography tours throughout the year and, with all the other projects, I don’t spend much time at home. ▶



BAOBAB TREES & FULL MOON Silhouetted trees photographed in Madagascar. Nikon D2x, Nikon 280mm f/2.8D, 25 secs, f/5.6, ISO100



BAOBAB TREES & OXCART An oxcart dwarfed by towering baobabs at sunrise. Nikon D2x, Nikon 120mm f/4, 1/400 sec, f/5.6, ISO100

“ Wildlife photography can create awareness of problems, and show people how precious a species is ”
Marsel van Oosten *Wildlife Photographer*

Could you shoot a wedding if you had to?
 I could, but I won't. I've shot two and found it very stressful. It requires a way of working that's opposite to what I prefer. I can appreciate good people photography, but I don't really like doing it myself.

Where do you get inspiration from?
 From other fields of the industry, but not nature shots. From an artistic point of view, nature photography is one of the least creative genres. Most of the time, the pros limit themselves to capturing the world as it is. I'm more inspired by arty or nude shots, in terms of mood and light.

How do you relax?
 I like to listen to death metal, and to debates on YouTube, but I usually do that

when I'm processing images. After a long day, I like to watch TV series – multiple episodes, one after the other. *24* is my favourite, *Lost* was good, *House* still is and I'm looking forward to watching the second seasons of *Homeland* and *The Killing*.

What's the worst thing about your job?
 The fact that it's nearly impossible to make a living from it. There's an unstoppable supply and an ever-decreasing demand.

Do you really believe photography can save wildlife?
 Wildlife photography can create awareness of problems, and show people how precious a species is. When people don't know, they don't care. That said, in the end it's all a matter of money – everything is.

What type of assignment presents the biggest challenge?
 As I said before, I went on assignment for *National Geographic Traveler* to shoot tigers in India. There was little time, and the tigers weren't showing themselves. I saw my first one just after sunset on my last drive. That was stressful, because of the deadline. Projects in countries that are difficult to get into, dangerous or in areas that are unknown are always a challenge.

What's the biggest change you've seen in your profession?
 Before digital, photography was a very obscure and expensive thing. Not many people knew what they were doing, and not many were shooting as many pictures as the pros did. With digital, people learn



HOW TO BE A WINNER

It was his early success in some big-name photography competitions that convinced Marsel van Oosten to quit his day job and become a professional wildlife photographer...

Since taking a gamble and swapping a busy but successful advertising career for a job as a freelance wildlife photographer, Marsel has continued to enter photo competitions, regularly winning awards in some of the world's most major contests. Clearly, he knows a thing or two about concocting the recipe for success. We asked him to share his top five tips for glory, and as he reveals below the secret isn't always about image quality – you also have to read the small print.

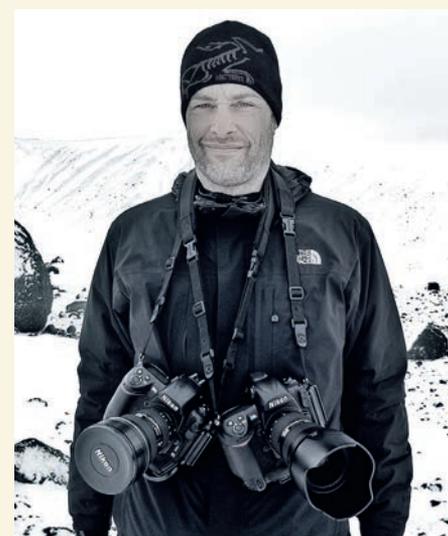
- Share your images on an online photography forum – there are lots to choose from. If your photos don't blow people away there, they're probably not going to convince a jury.

- Try to look at your own images as if they were taken by someone else. Would you really be that excited by them? Usually, the answer is no.

- Be original. A jury has to go through thousands – sometimes even tens of thousands – of images. They see fox and deer shots every year, so yours should be exceptional if you don't want to bore them to death.

- Read the competition rules carefully. A lot of people don't and their shots get disqualified without them even knowing it.

- Don't bother entering the Mickey Mouse competitions – they're only after your money, or cheap images for their own use.



Marsel suggests that a great way of improving your competition success is to share your shots with active online forums



much faster – the instant feedback shows them what they're doing wrong and they get better results. The fact that there are cameras everywhere nowadays, and that a photograph doesn't cost anything, has resulted in a ridiculous increase in the amount of pictures taken worldwide.

What's the downside to photography's greater popularity?

More people photographing means more people who want to take it to the next level. Publication in a magazine is high on the list of most aspiring photographers, and magazines can get away with not paying them. The huge supply of images has caused prices to drop to an insulting level. Image theft is also a big problem – I get at least one email a week from people

BAOBAB TREES & GIRL A girl stands in a swamp in Madagascar.
Nikon D2x, Nikon 120-400mm f/4, 1/13 sec, f/16, ISO100

who have seen my images in a magazine, newspaper or website without any credit.

HD movie or stills?

Stills. With stills I have much more control over a scene. With video you'll inevitably introduce a lot more elements into the frame, and I don't like that. That said, one of the things I really like about video is that you build up tension. You can start close and zoom out, or slowly reveal something.

Can you combine the two successfully?

I can't. I prefer stills. I've done a lot of TV commercials, though, so I can do video, but I just prefer photographs. ▶



CRANES Japanese red-crowned cranes perform a mating dance. Nikon D3, Nikon 200mm f/4G, 1/800 sec, f/10, ISO400



YOUNG BEAR A brown bear in Katmai National Park, Alaska. Nikon D2xs, Nikon 600mm f/4, 1/2000 sec, f/5.6, ISO200

Your wife works with you – how do you avoid getting in each other's way?

I help her with video, she helps me with photography. That way, we both benefit from having a full-time assistant.

What's been your greatest moment?

Probably my first publication in *National Geographic*. A two-page spread, with millions of copies worldwide.

And the worst or most embarrassing?

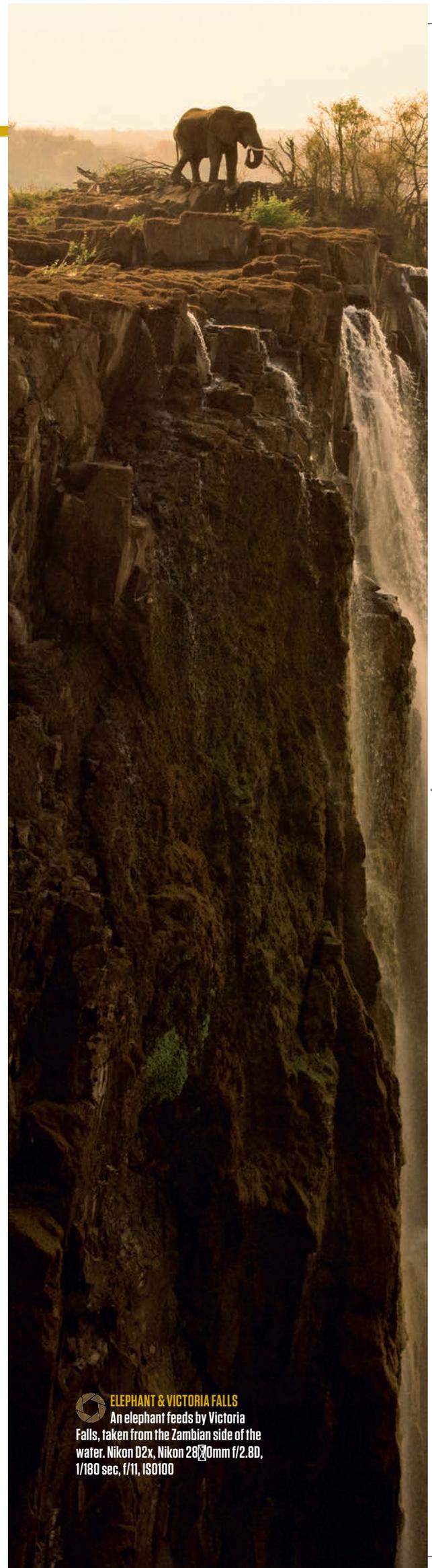
I went on a trip to Canada, to photograph the Northern Lights. This was in my early years using slides so I got the exposures wrong, and when I got home they were all

black. The worst moments are when other photographers copy our photo workshops down to the exact same itinerary.

If you were starting out today, would there be anything you'd do differently?

I'd probably start at a younger age. Other than that, I don't see what I should have done differently. ☐

Marsel is now taking bookings for the following photo holidays: Masai Mara Migration, September 2012; Wildlife Bootcamp, Spain, October 2012; Arches Under The Stars, Utah, January 2013; White & Wild Japan, February 2013. To find out more visit www.squiver.com



ELEPHANT & VICTORIA FALLS An elephant feeds by Victoria Falls, taken from the Zambian side of the water. Nikon D2x, Nikon 28mm f/2.8D, 1/180 sec, f/11, ISO100

LUCKY SHOTS

According to Marsel, even his most successful shots owe a great deal to sheer luck...

Victoria Falls is one of the most photographed sights in Africa, so when Marsel went there he was reluctant to take pictures. But an unexpected visitor quickly changed his mind.

Tell us the story of the elephant

■ After I'd been at the Falls a few hours the elephant suddenly walked all the way up to the edge, and I had to run to the side with my 280mm lens in order to see as much of the falling water as possible.

How long did the elephant stay for?

■ Maybe five minutes, but only a few seconds in this perfect position. When I'd taken the shot, I knew it was special. Later, I heard that nobody had ever seen an elephant that close to the edge of the waterfall before.

You say the luck factor is important in wildlife photography, but don't you think you make your own luck?

■ In nature photography you have little influence on the most important aspects of a scene — when the light is perfect, the animal doesn't show up; when the animal is there, it's facing the wrong way. That makes wildlife photography frustrating, but also addictive. Most wildlife shots rely on luck, especially when something spectacular happens. You can't make your own luck, but you can increase your chances of getting lucky by working hard.



PENGUIN FALLING OFF ICE An Adie penguin in Antarctica.
Nikon D2x, Nikon 280mm f/2.8D, 1/180 sec, f/8, ISO320